



# A Place in Heaven

*Elijah the prophet revealed himself and told the rabbis which profession earns an immediate place in heaven. Which profession do you think it was?*

## A Proud Jew

Last week, Jackie Mason — a comedian loved by many Jews and non-Jews alike — passed away.

Jackie Mason was not his birth name. He was born Yaakov Moshe Maze; Maze is an acronym for “*mizerah Aharon hakohen*,” and his father, grandfather and great-grandfather were all rabbis.

Maze was a well-known Rabbinic family. Around one hundred years ago, there was a famous rabbi named Rabbi Yaakov Maze, who served as the official chief rabbi (*rav mitaam*) of Moscow.

He became world famous for his defense of the Jews during the Beilis trial. The Beilis trial was the most famous blood-libel of the twentieth century, when a Jew named Mendel Beilis was accused of killing a gentile child to use his blood for matzos.

The accusers claimed that it wasn't that all Jews practiced this horrible custom. That would be too ridiculous a claim. They said that it was only the fundamentalists and the fanatics — the Chassidim — who did so. In that area of Czarist Russia, the most dominant group of Chassidim was the Chabad movement, so the trial became essentially a referendum on Chabad and its adherents.

The defense team asked Rabbi Mazeh to come from Moscow and refute the claim that Jewish tradition necessitates human blood in Matzah. He was a brilliant speaker and writer, and he delivered an eight-hour defense where he proved all the claims false. In the end, Mendel Beilis was acquitted and the entire Jewish world — and especially the Chassidim — were able to breathe a sigh of relief.

I don't know if there is a close family relation between Rabbi Mazeh and Jackie Mason, but there is no doubt that they stem from the same family. Moreover: Yaakov Mazeh died in 1924, and Jackie — also Yaakov — was born in 1928; it is quite possible that he was named for his famous relative who saved the Jewish people from terrible pogroms.

Jackie grew up in a family of rabbis. His father was a rabbi, as were his three older brothers. By age 12, he understood that his future was not in the rabbinate. The brother closest to him in age, outshined him academically, so, to get attention, he would make jokes. But the environment where he was raised didn't appreciate his humor and someone always put an end to his antics. Not being able to disappoint his father, he continued studying for the rabbinate and received his ordination from the world-famous Rabbi Moshe Feinstein.

When he served as a rabbi, he noticed that not too many people were showing up to services, so he began telling jokes and more people began to show up. He began to notice that his crowd was no longer Jewish — non-Jews were being attracted to the services as well. As time went on, he realized that his future was in comedy.

He would often say that a rabbi needs to have a sense of humor. Most Jews don't come to shul to study Torah; they come to shul because it's the Jewish club. That's where they meet friends, close deals and talk politics. The last thing they actually want to do is hear the rabbi preaching. If the rabbi wants to get their attention and sneak a Jewish

message into the ears of his congregants, he needs to find creative ways to do it.

Jackie, in his own funny way, managed to remind Jews of their Judaism. Many Jews didn't appreciate his jokes because they were "too Jewish." His heavy Yiddish accent would remind them of their past that they were trying to escape, and they weren't always too happy about it.

In general, many of his jokes were about Jews and the ways they attempt to fit into America and free themselves of their Jewish identity. He said when he sees people making a fool out of themselves, he feels the obligation to bring it to their attention.

In 2009, he met a Chabad Rabbi in Miami, Florida, and he offered to make a show at his Torah class in the Chabad center. Needless to say, a large crowd showed up to listen to what he had to say. He said that he chose to support the class because he wanted to strengthen Judaism, and he related that he had the opportunity to meet the Rebbe. At first, he said, he was afraid that the Rebbe would demand that he be a better Jew, but the Rebbe actually wished him success in his mission to bring joy to people.

## **Who Goes to Heaven?**

On the topic of comedians, the Talmud relates a fascinating story:

Rabbi Beroka, a saintly rabbi, was in the marketplace one day when he suddenly met Elijah the Prophet. He decided to utilize the encounter to ask an interesting question: Who in this marketplace, he asked Elijah, is certainly going to Heaven?

Elijah turned around and pointed to two nondescript individuals. "They have a place in Heaven," he said.

Rabbi Beroka immediately began chasing after those two fellows and

asked them what their occupation was. “We are comedians,” they replied. “We are happy ourselves and we bring our joy to others. Whenever we see sad people, we do comedy and raise their spirits.” (Taanis 22a).

## **Which Joy is Well-Earned?**

This week, we read a portion in the Torah called, “Kol Hachechor.” This passage is read on the holidays, because it mentions all three – Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot.

Now, we all know that joy is a commandment for the holidays in general, and on the holiday of Sukkot in particular. But upon examining the text, you will notice that joy is not mentioned in the verses regarding Passover. It says that we should be joyous on Shavuot, and it says twice that we should be happy on Sukkot (the famous song *vesmachta* comes from this passage), but Passover does not include a mention of joy at all.

Why does Passover have no mention of joy and Shavuot only once? The Midrash explains that the three holidays are connected to the agricultural year. Passover is the holiday of the spring when the harvest ripens, Shavuot is the “holiday of harvest,” and Sukkot is the “holiday of collection,” when fruit of the trees are ready as well and the harvest is collected and brought home.

The Midrash says that on Passover, when the harvest is not yet ready, there is no reason to celebrate. On Shavuot, we celebrate because the produce is brought home, but on the other hand, the fruit on the trees have not yet ripened. Sukkot, when everything is ripe and harvested, is the true time for celebration. In fact, there is another verse in the Torah for celebrating on Sukkot, bringing the total to three.

But a question remains: A Jew who lives in the diaspora and is not a farmer has a great reason to celebrate Passover: it’s the day G-d took

us out of Egypt! The other two holidays are only extensions of that event!

The answer is hidden in the difference between joy and comedy:

You might sit and laugh at a comedy show for hours. Does that transform you into a happy person after you go home? It may pull you out of a bad mood, and it is indeed a good beginning, but is that really what brings you joy?

Happiness comes through productivity. When you create something or contribute something to others, it gives you a good feeling and brings you joy. This was the Rebbe's answer to countless people who requested his guidance for matters like depression. He always said that they should involve themselves in helping others, and those activities will bring them joy.

For the same reason, the Rebbe explained, Passover is not written in the Torah as a time of joy because G-d revealed himself in a mighty way and pulled the Jews out of Egypt. It wasn't something they achieved on their own; they were just passive participants.

When Shavuot approached, the situation had changed to a certain extent. The Jews had prepared for 49 days of Sefirat Haomer to be worthy of receiving the Torah. The giving of the Torah was still a revelation from above, but the people had invested some effort. Therefore, the Torah mentions joy once.

But Sukkot is different. It follows the holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, when we do all the work ourselves. That's when it's really time to celebrate. (Toras Menachem vol. 41 pg. 92).

My friends, we are not expected to be Jackie Mason, but every one of us could bring genuine joy to at least one more person.