

Standup Comedy Under Fire

Drawing Divine Inspiration through a unique Sukkot tradition.

Kobi Arieli

Kobi Arieli is a well-known Israeli comedian. He says that even as a four-year-old, he was already doing impressions, trying to make people laugh. He likes to point out that humor often thrives in conservative societies because everything is so tense. Humor, in his words, is the relief valve, a way to shine a light on the subtleties of the community and make them a little more bearable.

Recently, he wrote a column in Israel Hayom about his experience during the Oct 1, 2024 missile attack from Iran on Israel. He was on his way to Jerusalem and had stopped at a gas station to grab a cup of coffee. Suddenly, boom—an air raid siren. Chaos erupted. The convenience store was packed with people, as was the gas station itself. Everyone started running in all directions, frantically asking where the bomb shelter was. Since he happened to be closest to it, Kobi found himself the first to enter the “shelter,” which turned out to be the stockroom of the convenience store.

Now, this wasn't some spacious, state-of-the-art bunker. It was a small, concrete-reinforced room, crammed wall-to-wall with shelves full of snacks: chips, candy, wafers, chocolate bars,

disposable cups, cigarettes, and soda cans. A veritable kingdom of sugar and caffeine.

His first thought, as he stood there surrounded by all this junk food, was, “Well, no matter how long we’re stuck here, at least we won’t die of hunger.” More and more panicked people started piling into this tiny room, quickly filling every inch of space. As the booms of the interceptors outside grew louder, so did the tension inside. Until that point, Kobi had been relatively calm, but now he could feel an unfamiliar pressure creeping up his chest—anxiety.

As the explosions intensified outside, the atmosphere inside grew even tenser. One woman said, “This feels way more serious than last time.” A man added, “It’s dangerous here. This is a gas station!” Another woman said, “I can’t breathe.” Someone else shouted, “Water! We need water!” And a little boy, eyes wide with fear, asked, “Are we going to die?”

It’s in moments like these that you realize—humor can only go so far. But, you know, standing in a “fortress” made of candy bars, it’s hard not to chuckle, even just a little.

The Self Appointed Standup

He began comforting the little boy, making silly faces and playing around to lighten the mood. He chatted with the anxious woman, then climbed onto a chair and told a joke: “Well, no matter how long we’re stuck here, at least they’ve prepared plenty of food!” Slowly but surely, this turned into a little stand-up routine. And with each passing minute, the tension in that cramped space melted away.

People started laughing, calming down, and even taking selfies together. Gradually, folks began to feel comfortable enough to step outside. By that point, Kobi had unofficially taken on the role of “therapist,” standing by the door and seeing everyone off with a smile and a cheerful “Chag Sameach.”

Later, he reflected that, in truth, it wasn’t just him helping them—they helped him. From the moment he opened his mouth to lighten the mood, all traces of the anxiety that had been rising in his chest vanished. And it wasn’t just him. Anyone in that little shelter who found someone to help or comfort felt the same relief. In trying to calm others, they helped themselves most of all.

The Unknown Mitzvah

We have just begun to celebrate Sukkot. The very first mitzvah we perform for the holiday is the mitzvah of sitting in the sukkah, which we fulfill right as the holiday begins. The next morning, we begin the mitzvah of shaking the lulav. Between these two well-known mitzvot, however, there’s a slightly lesser-known tradition: the Simchat Beit HaShoeva.

Back in the days of the Temple, during Sukkot, they would go to the Shiloach spring, draw a liter of water, and bring it to the Temple to pour over the altar during the morning offering.

The Talmud in Rosh Hashanah (16a) explains why water was poured on the altar during Sukkot in addition to wine. It is as if G-d is telling us, “Pour water before Me during Sukkot so that you will receive rains of blessing.” Sukkot is the time when G-d decides all matters related to water for the coming year,

including how much rain will fall and where it will land. In other words, this is when G-d determines if there will be floods, hurricanes, or other natural events connected to water.

This custom was no minor affair. During the time of the Second Temple, the water libation became a grand spectacle and joyous celebration in Jerusalem. People from all over, men, women, and children, would gather in the Temple courtyard to witness this exciting event.

Gathering the Holy Spirit

At the beginning of the night, the great sages would dance before the crowds, holding torches, and this celebration would go on all night long. As dawn approached, the sound of trumpets would fill the air, signaling it was time to draw water from the Shiloach spring. Upon their return, they would pour the water over the altar.

These nights are described in the Talmud (Sukkah 53a) as unparalleled in their joy. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chanania said, “When we would rejoice at the Simchat Beit HaShoeva, we didn’t taste sleep at all.” He added that, “Whoever has not seen the joy of the Beit HaShoeva has never seen true joy in their life.” The celebration is called Simchat Beit HaShoeva—the Joy of the Water Drawing—because of this ritual. Even today, as a remembrance of the Temple, we celebrate Simchat Beit HaShoeva with festivities all over the world. The Rebbe greatly encouraged this tradition, emphasizing that it should be celebrated with fanfare and excitement everywhere.

But the name of the celebration is a bit peculiar—“Simchat Beit

HaShoeva,” literally “the joy of the water drawing.” Why is it named after the drawing of water? Wouldn’t the main point be the pouring of the water on the altar, just as every day wine was poured on the altar? Why not call it Nissuch HaMayim—the Pouring of the Water—just as it’s called Nissuch HaYayin for the wine offering? Why place the emphasis on the *drawing* of the water?

The sages tell us in the Jerusalem Talmud that it’s called Beit HaShoeva because “*misham hayu shoavim ruach hakodesh, from there they would draw the Divine Spirit*” (Yerushalmi Sukkah 5:1). For example, the Talmud shares, the prophet Jonah was sent his prophetic message while participating in the Simchat Beit HaShoeva.

Why, of all places, did prophecy come to him there? For a prophet to receive Divine inspiration, they had to be in a state of joy. As the Talmud teaches, “Prophecy does not rest upon a person in a state of laziness or sadness, but only in joy” (Shabbat 30b). The Rebbe adds that the joy of a mitzvah is like a vessel through which one can draw and receive the Divine Spirit. How much more so is this true during the festival of Sukkot—zman simchateinu, the time of our rejoicing, and especially during the Simchat Beit HaShoeva, which elevates the joy to its highest level.

What’s the deal with Sukkos

What’s particularly interesting, the Rebbe noted, is that the Simchat Beit HaShoeva celebration is done as a remembrance of the Temple—but we don’t actually do what they did. On Pesach night, when we eat korech, the famous “sandwich” of

Hillel, we eat matzah and maror together, just as Hillel did when the Temple stood. True, Hillel's sandwich also had a piece of meat from the Pesach offering, which gave it a completely different taste, but we still try to replicate it as closely as possible, to remember what our ancestors did during the time of the Temple. Similarly, we eat the afikoman as a remembrance of the Pesach offering.

If we make these practical remembrances for other mitzvot, why don't we do the same for the Simchat Beit HaShoeva? Shouldn't we draw water from a spring just like they did in the days of the Temple—or at least draw some plain water as a remembrance?

Drawing water isn't really much of a task. Water is one of the most common things in every household, and there's no significant effort involved. And yet, despite this, for countless generations, the custom has been to celebrate the joy of the event without any specific connection to the actual water drawing.

What we see from this, the Rebbe explains, is that the main focus isn't the water, but the joy. When Jews are in a state of joy, they can even merit divine inspiration—ruach hakodesh—an entirely different level of spiritual experience.

The Special Visit

In 1980, on the 10th of Shevat, the Rebbe celebrated the 30th anniversary of his leadership. At that farbrengen, a very important guest attended: the renowned Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik. He had told his students that he planned to attend

for about half an hour. In the end, he stayed for over two hours.

Afterward, his students asked him to share his impressions of the farbrengen with the Rebbe. Rabbi Soloveitchik gave an intriguing response. He said that the Talmud describes how, during the Simchat Beit HaShoeva, people would draw divine inspiration. And, he explained, at the Rebbe's farbrengen, he finally understood what the sages meant when they said that at the Simchat Beit HaShoeva, people would "draw" ruach hakodesh.

Every farbrengen with the Rebbe would last several hours, during which the Rebbe would share deep insights of Torah. Thousands of men and women attended these gatherings, and while the Rebbe spoke in Yiddish, a significant portion of the crowd only understood English, Hebrew, or French. In fact, you could say that half the audience didn't understand Yiddish at all. Yet, despite this, they stood packed together, doing whatever they could to be in the Rebbe's presence during the farbrengen.

Rabbi Soloveitchik captured the essence of what happened at these farbrengens. He described how anyone who was there felt that the Rebbe lifted them a foot off the ground. The singing and the joy of the farbrengen elevated everyone into a different atmosphere. When people left after the farbrengen, it was like they were coming down from another planet, transitioning from a spiritual world back to the physical, material one.

And this, Rabbi Soloveitchik said, was the essence of Simchat Beit HaShoeva: "From there, they would draw ruach hakodesh."