



On Entertainment: An Important Tool or Mere Escapism?

Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

Dean, Center for Modern Torah Leadership

Rabbi Yaakov Menken uses the death of Robin Williams [here](#) as an occasion to distinguish between true and false happiness. True happiness is either שמחה בחלקך – happiness with one's lot – or שמחה של מצוה – happiness in the performance of proper action. Therefore, happiness is not a casual thing, it doesn't just happen, it is something that one can pursue and develop. This is why Chazal say "it is a great Mitzvah to always be happy" — it's something we can cultivate. False happiness, or escapism, is what entertainers bring, and recognizing this leads to the depression endemic among comedians.

Now to the best of my knowledge the author of מצוה גדולה להיות בשמחה תמיד was R. Nachman of Bratzlav, not an Amora or Tanna. This is important firstly because levels of authority matter, and no one should feel compelled to agree with it if it seems intuitively false or in discord with authoritative texts. Of course Rav Nachman was aware of the prima facie contradiction between his statement and the laws of aveilut or 9Av, so the argument that his statement is obviously false is obviously shallow. Rav Nachman, as best I can tell, also engaged in a lifelong battle with depression, so one should also not understand his statement as implying that happiness is easily attained, or that failure to achieve it should significantly diminish one's sense of self-worth.

By the same token, Rabbi Menken is surely aware of Taanit 22a, where Eliyahu haNavi tells Rav Broka Choza'ah (possible "the Seer", but Rashi says it is just a family name) that two אינשי בדוחי ("men of good cheer") will go to the World to Come because of their profession. Rashi may say, with Rabbi Menken, that their own happiness was contagious, but Rabeinu Chanan'el, whose text read חן שפה ודברים המסירים עצב מן ("men who cheer up the sad"), says they had הלב ("grace with language and methods for removing sadness from the heart"). R. Chanan'el does not require comedians to be happy, nor, I submit, does he require the happiness they dispense to be true and lasting. Rabbi Menken is certainly entitled to follow a reasonable reading of Rashi, but I suggest that R. Chananel thought differently.

A deeper issue is the apparent assumption that all comedians, and Robin Williams specifically, are engaged solely in creating escapist fantasies. Many times the purpose of comedy is to enable us to face reality without breaking, or to puncture the escapist illusions with which we surround reality. Laughter is not opposed to seriousness, only to gravity. My sense is that we could very much use some deeply serious Orthodox comedians.

Nor should Robin Williams be reduced to the role of comedian, when he was in fact a versatile actor with a particular gift for comic improvisation. For example, I have articulated [here](#) the way in which the movie Dead Poets Society influences my pedagogic practice.

The final issue, then, is the extent to which the enterprises of fiction and performance in all media should be regarded as mere entertainment, rather than as potentially powerful vehicles for conveying powerful human and Divine truths. This is perhaps inversely related to the extent to which we share Maimonides' willingness to regard many aggadot as allegories. My sense is that in both Israel and the United States we are beginning to see an efflorescence of Orthodox art, and that this should be celebrated and encouraged.