

## A Little Holiday Humor

By Bill Lazarus

That reminds me of a joke. Most things do. I can't help it. It's part of my Jewish cultural heritage.

I saw the impact first hand while teaching a class on Jewish humor in Stetson University's Continuing Education program. I taught it three times. The first class was composed of almost all Jews. They laughed from breakfast through bedtime. The next group was about filled with Jews. The Christian portion sat there quietly and watched me; the Jews in the group couldn't stop laughing and telling jokes.

The third class was all Christian. On the first day of class, midway through my opening monologue, I endured what performers call "flop sweat." That happens spontaneously when no one responds. They just didn't get the jokes. In fact, they didn't appreciate the humor at all.

Pity. Jewish humor has become an integral part of American humor, something worth recalling as we celebrate this country's birthday.

The names of Jewish comedians who established what is now known as American humor could fill an encyclopedia: Jack Benny, George Burns, The Marx Brothers, The Three Stooges, Ed Wynn, Eddie Cantor, Don Rickles, Milton Berle, Gilda Radner, Gene Wilder, Jack E. Leonard, Mort Sahl, Joan Rivers, Billy Crystal, Myron Cohen, Danny Kaye, Adam Sandler, Jerry Lewis and so many more.

Probably without knowing the sources, they simply built on a centuries-old tradition born in the Bible and developed under the cruelest of circumstances.

To the surprise of many, the Bible is replete with humor. A sainted teenager in the Middle Ages used to berate Christians for telling jokes because, he pointed out correctly, there's no humor in the New Testament. He was right. That's not true with the Jewish sacred text.

The humor is often sardonic, even sarcastic. In Judges, for example, Ehud rescues the Jews from a Canaanite oppressor by stabbing a heavy-set king. The guards don't respond despite the resulting smell, because, the text reads, they were used to the stench when the king used the toilet. That won't get anyone rolling in the aisle, but raises a wry smile. So does Haman's comeuppance versus Mordecai in the book of Esther. There are also puns, plays on words and much more.

By itself, that did not allow Jewish humor to blossom. Ghettos were needed. Isolated in a Christian world, Jews were forced to live in small communities or walled sections of towns. There, powerless and impotent to fight back, they used the only weapon readily available – their wit.