

Laughter

BY RABBI DAVID WOLPE

Is there another religious tradition with a major character named "laughter?" Yitzchak means "laughter" and alone among the patriarchs, his name is not changed — because God names him.

When God is bested in an argument in the Talmud, Elijah reports that God's reaction was to laugh. In addition to lamenting the difficulties of the world, Jews have long learned that now and then you've just got to laugh.

"I've often been accused of being a self-hating Jew," said Woody Allen. "While it is true I hate myself, it's not because I'm Jewish." Self-deprecating humor is a weapon of choice for Jews throughout the centuries. So is humor that points out the foibles of others.

The great Hasidic master Rebbe Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev once approached a Jew who was infamous as a miserly, difficult, and cruel man. "I envy you," said the Rabbi. "Why?" asked his surprised interlocutor. "We have learned that in Messianic times, sins will turn to rays of light. My, how you will shine."

The Talmud tells of jesters who lift the spirits of others; they are assured of a place in the world to come. And what would such a world be like? A place, perhaps, of no tears. But surely in paradise people laugh and laugh."