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What's So Funny About Arguing with God? A Case for Playful Argumentation from Jewish Literature

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Abstract In this paper, we show that God is portrayed in the Hebrew Bible and in the Rabbinic literature—some of the very Hebrew texts that have influenced the three major world religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—as One who can be argued with and even changes his mind. Contrary to fundamentalist positions, in the Hebrew Bible and other Jewish texts God is omniscient but enjoys good, playful argumentation, broadening the possibilities for reasoning and reasonability. Arguing with God has also had a profound influence upon Jewish humor, demonstrating that humans can joke with God. More specifically, we find in Jewish literature that humor's capacity to bisociate between different domains of human experience can share a symbiotic relationship with argumentation's emphasis on producing multiple, contested perspectives. Overall, once mortals realize that figures such as God can accept many perspectives through humor, teasing, arguing, criticism, and in at least one case, even lawsuits, a critical point emerges: citizens should learn to live, laugh, and reason with others with whom they disagree.

Keywords Argumentation · Play · Humor · Religion · Bisociation · Dissoi logoi

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Since God can be austere and punishing, religious fundamentalists of all stripes may take offense at the very notion of including the topics of God, humor, and argument in the same breath. Yet a review of ancient Hebrew texts—some of the very texts that have influenced the three major world religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—tells a different story. If God has a sense of humor, can be argued with, and can even change His mind, values such as mercy, the acceptance of others' shortcomings, and collaborative engagement with diverse people should be important for faith communities following Hebraic traditions. Ultimately, mortals should be prepared to argue and laugh in unity rather than go to war over differences.

This paper contributes to the ongoing effort to construct productive norms for human communication and deliberation, following calls for examining inductive, “interactive” and “emergent” models that can provide important guides for public argument (Hicks 256; Freelon; Black). In particular, argumentation scholars have continued to search for and advance the argumentative structures and processes best suited to humanity's future—as in Combs's comparison of the differing argumentative styles and assumptions in Daoist and Greek debate, and Liu's analysis of practices like “cross-arguing,” where “two contending sides ... each try to justify [their] position in the other party's terms” (309; see also Dreyfus). Exploring and constructing norms from religious spheres has remained equally important to this research trajectory. Goodnight clarifies that one of Habermas's main concerns has been “to transform the ‘telos of reaching understanding’ developed in religious traditions to the secular, argumentative realm of making informed, meaningful, collaborative life choices” (103; see also Platt and Majdik).

In this spirit, argumentation scholar David Frank juxtaposed classical and Jewish understandings of reasoning to illustrate what insights Talmudic and similar traditions can offer the theory and practice of argument. Frank writes that:

The Jewish tradition offers much to the broader study of argumentation. Indeed, the process of argumentation is often more important than Truth. Ultimately, the Jewish tradition of argument teaches the global community of the benefits of reasoned discourse and pluralism.... In this tradition, God argues with humans. In turn, humans argue with each other, authority resides in the strength of reasons that acknowledge experience and the Other, and disagreement and contrarian thinking are prized. (85)

Rather than remaining passive recipients of deterministic messages from above, many Jewish works position human beings as active agents in petitioning God and one another to take certain courses of action. Frank points out that “by arguing, rather than simply exercising raw power, God relinquishes control over and vests freedom to humans” (74), underscoring how argumentation can release agency within this faith tradition.¹

We add to this line of scholarship the idea that Jewish theological texts and a range of related literatures exhibit connections between argumentation and playful humor,

¹ Although there are not many studies of argumentation in Judaic religious texts, Jacobs also focused on the use of the *kal va-chomer* (a fortiori argument, i.e., “all the more so”) and its use in the Hebrew Bible. The *kal va-chomer* is one of the thirteen principles of logic used in rabbinic exegesis and in Jewish law. According to the Midrash (Genesis Rabbah 92:7), this type of logical argumentation is used ten times in the Hebrew Bible.

with implications for the theory and practice of argument in and potentially outside the tradition. In essence, in Jewish theological and similar literature, an argumentative orientation has provided grounds for humor with and about the Almighty, which in turn constructs space for further argument and agency both between humans and God and with humans and one another. This focus connects to Palczewski's call for scholars to examine the significance of "play" as an expansive metaphor for argumentation, since "argument is fun and arguers can be playful" (16; see also Asen, "A Discourse"), even when debating serious matters. Palczewski's recommendation for the productiveness of the "play" frame—rather than the rampant "war" metaphors found in public discourse about argument—bears a resemblance to cases other scholars have made about humor. Both philosophically and empirically, humor and play tend to foster more open and flexible outlooks than the narrowness and fixity of tragic perspectives (Bergson; Morreall; McGhee), with Burke even suggesting that a "comic frame" is one of the broadest and most valuable orientations for human thought and action. Madsen too finds that this frame counteracts the "'bureaucratic' mindset that can eliminate the bases for constructive argument" (164).

More specifically, we find in Jewish literature that *humor's capacity to bisociate between different domains of human experience can share a symbiotic relationship with argumentation's emphasis on producing multiple, contested perspectives*. Arthur Koestler once drew attention to humor's ability to bring together "two mutually incompatible codes, or associative contexts," with "the perceiving of a situation or idea ... in two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference" (35; see also Waisanen, "A Citizens" 130–134). The term *bisociation* distinguishes between the skills of reasoning in singular ways and the more creative act of "always opera[ting] on more than one plane" (35). Humor is often produced by linking together what could equally be called differing "'types of logic,' 'codes of behavior,' 'universes of discourse,'" or variable "matrices of thought" within which less flexible codes of rules and forms of reasoning tend to be nested (38, 40). Between these frames of reference one can find "link[s]" or a "focal concept, word, or situation which is bisociated with both mental planes" (64). Mel Brooks's movies, for example, often bisociate the logics of Nazism against alternate contexts like Broadway musicals (as in *The Producers*). As a link between the two different domains, seeing typically austere soldiers in military garb prancing around a stage with fluid, silly movements targets the very resistance to bisociative thinking in totalizing, fascist discourses.

Similarly, the study and practice of argumentation has long focused on making more than one perspective available for communication and critique between interlocutors. In particular, the ancient concept of *dissoi logoi* or "the practice of airing multiple sides of vexing questions for the purpose of stimulating critical thinking" (Mitchell 95) has been foundational to argumentation. Originally defined by the sophist Protagoras, who taught that "two accounts are present about every 'thing'" (Schiappa, *Protagoras* 100; Kerferd 84; Crick 343), *dissoi logoi*—like humor—encourages the same skill of producing other viewpoints. Argument scholars have described some of the instances, functions, and phases of humor during U.S. election debates (Smith and Voth; Peifer and Holbert; Rhea). In this analysis, we move to a different context, Jewish literature, to show how traditions of

arguing and using humor with God construct norms for argumentation as the playful promotion of differing perspectives.²

Given the planetary stakes for ideas about the human and divine, it is especially important to draw out productive ideas about argumentation and humor within and between religious traditions, where adherence to doctrine can so easily turn to dogma. Differences in ideology between groups or countries, whether based on politics, economics, or religion, can often lead to war (Barash and Webel 192). In one sense, the grounds for unnecessary conflict often stem from ideologues who tend to be certain that only their particular beliefs are correct, with little toleration for dissent or further learning. In this study, we will show how strands of Jewish theology and related literatures can rebut such approaches. To be clear, while our case should certainly speak to those within Jewish and similar traditions, we hope to show that the norms of humor and argument constructed from this tradition also have some broader relevance to secular discourse theory and those for whom the religion is not an authority. At a minimum, such readers will be better prepared to advocate that religionists influenced by these traditions see argumentation and tolerance as more central to their beliefs than they may be admitting.

Although the thought of arguing or disagreeing with an omniscient God might seem strange, a number of biblical characters do just that. Contrary to fundamentalist claims,³ within limits the God of the Hebrew Bible is omniscient but enjoys a good argument, broadening the possibilities for human agency and reasoning and reasonability. More so, an understanding of argumentation with the divine has had a related, profound effect on Judaic humor, raising questions like: Does God have a sense of humor? Can he be joked about or with? And if God is omniscient, why does he ever lose an argument or change his mind?⁴ Overall, once mortals realize that—at least in the Jewish tradition—God can accept many perspectives through humor, teasing, arguing, disputes, criticism, and in at least one case, even lawsuits, a critical point emerges: citizens should learn to live and reason with others with whom they disagree.

Toward this end, in the following sections we analyze how argumentation with God has been emphasized throughout many Jewish theological literatures, as a foundation for playful, humorous orientations between mortals and the Almighty. These texts include the Hebrew Bible, the Talmud, the Midrash, and Chassidic tales and other Jewish literature. This essay then considers how humor and argument in these texts have influenced modern Jewish joking with and about God, promoting agency and collaboration while countering fundamentalist and antideliberative perspectives. We conclude with several implications highlighting the possibilities

² While not considering the specific mechanisms by which humor and argument can interact, philosopher Ted Cohen also speculates that Jewish historical emphases upon critical reasoning and logic likely share a relationship with Jewish jokes (65). Cohen states that: “A person in this tradition does not only learn and memorize the conclusions reached, although he [sic] must do some of that. Rather, he joins this study: he argues, debates, contests, criticizes, and learns; and he does not stop” (66)—a point aligning with our analysis.

³ We follow Berger’s (*The Heretical*) definition of “fundamentalism.” In a world in which “choice” among many available options is a defining feature of faith communities, Berger outlines three modern approaches to religion, one of which is “deductive” fundamentalist approaches that simply affirm inviolable traditions or tenets in ways that are impervious to incoming information or further reasoning.

⁴ An unpublished working paper upon which this essay is based can be found at Friedman and Friedman.

for reasoning and reasonability both in and outside the Jewish faith tradition. We also recognize some potential limitations of and qualifications for this analysis, given more malevolent portrayals of God and humor's darker side as a form of communication.

1 Playful Argumentation with the Omniscient

Much research in the areas of Judaic and Religious Studies focuses on topics dealing with how God is portrayed in the Bible and Rabbinic literature, and such a review would require an article by itself. Scholars have noted that Rabbinic literature is replete with anthropomorphism, especially in its parables (Stern, *Parables* 97–101), positioning the Omniscient as a relatable entity. The Pentateuch uses numerous anthropomorphisms to describe God, so it is not surprising that rabbinic literature follows suit (Stern, *Midrash* 73–84). Other scholars have noted how irony, both humorous and tragic, is used a great deal in the Hebrew Bible (Good). Whedbee declares that “the Holy Book we call the Bible revels in a profoundly ambivalent laughter, a divine and human laughter that by turns is both mocking and joyous, subversive and celebrative, and finally a laughter that results in an exuberant and transformative comic vision” (4). Similar to the position we undertake in this analysis, Carolyn Sharp too notes how the Hebrew Bible often refuses “the limitations of bibliolatry and literalism.... monologic speech and monologic interpretation” (241).

Scholars have seen humor and comic elements in the Hebrew Bible as “a valuable strategy for biblical exegesis” (Brenner and Radday 13), enumerating in detail the different types of humor in the book (Friedman). Spaulding notes that “the Torah abounds in every form of witticism, humor, riddle and practical joke” (xiv). While the Hebrew Bible mentions the term “laughter” 50 times, many historical Jewish figures, movements, and traditions have also been instrumental in promoting humor, from witty Hasidic sages and Yiddish theaters to the acceptance of joking during Purim (Avner 591–592). Relative to argumentation studies, less considered has been the relationship between God as arguer and humor, which might challenge the reification of human symbols and sponsor dialogue, reciprocity, and tolerance.

Before exploring how argument and humor interact more explicitly in Jewish theology, and, as this may be a new or strange idea for some readers, it is worth spotlighting examples in the Hebrew Bible where mortals argue or disagree with an omnipotent and omniscient God. Surprisingly, God does not do very well in these disputes, which, in itself, can be considered quite humorous. How does one even begin to have the temerity to disagree with an omniscient God? Since God knows exactly what individuals are going to say, why would He be swayed by an argument? Yet it is exactly the tensions raised by such questions—particularly the incongruities generated between mortal and immortal reasoning—that provide humans with humorous grounds for further argument and agency. Funnily enough, in many of the examples, the mortal even wins.

1.1 The Hebrew Bible

In the Hebrew Bible, God appears to enjoy negotiating with mortals. Perhaps the most famous example is that of Abraham “haggling” with God to save Sodom and Gomorra from destruction:

- Abraham: What if there are 50 innocent people in the city? Will you still destroy it?
 God: If I find 50 innocent people in Sodom, I will spare the entire area.
 Abraham: Suppose there are 45... ?
 God: I will not destroy it if I find 45...
 Abraham: What if there are 40?
 God: I will not act if there are 40. (Genesis 18:23–33)⁵

As this conversation continues, Abraham proposes and God agrees to allow for 30, 20, and then ten in succession, until Abraham finally gives up, presumably because even ten innocents could not be found in the two towns. Abraham, while arguing with God, even has the temerity to blurt: “Shall the Judge of the whole world not act justly” (Genesis 18:25)? At least in this example, the God of the Hebrew Bible may be omniscient but accepts and even welcomes criticism.

Beyond negotiation, God often exhibits patience and an ability to work with refutations when attempting to persuade human beings. When God asks Moses to deliver the Israelites from the hands of the Egyptian oppressors, Moses declines five times using five different arguments ranging from “who am I that I should go to Pharaoh” to “but they will not believe me” to “I am not a man of words” (Exodus 3:11–4:10). God refutes each one of Moses’ arguments, performing miracles along the way to add some rhetorical flourish to the persuasive task. Moses arouses God’s wrath when he finally tells him to send anyone but himself (Exodus 4:13), showing that the prophet-to-be’s previous arguments had merely been excuses. More so, Moses’ failure was one of deliberation—he had not really brought his best argumentative abilities to the encounter.

The God and Moses debate continues at critical junctures throughout the Hebrew Bible, with further argument and agency proceeding from the prior encounters. After the Israelites created a golden calf, God tells Moses to “leave me alone so my fierce wrath can blaze against them, and I will destroy them” (Exodus 32:10). At this point, Moses has not yet said anything, but understood from these words that God appeared to be encouraging him to defend his people. Moses uses an argument that if God eradicates the Israelites, the Egyptians will mock the Almighty and say that He took them out of Egypt with an evil intent to slay them in the mountains (Exodus 32:12), effectively holding the omniscient accountable to his own omniscient standards. Moses makes the point that if God were to wipe out the Israelites, the Egyptians would mock Him and say that either He was too weak or too capricious to save the Jewish people. Eventually, the Lord gave in and “repented of the evil which he thought to do to his people” (Exodus 32:14). In this situation,

⁵ Please note that translations of the Hebrew Bible and other religious texts in this analysis are the authors’ own.

even the omniscient One can change his mind, humbling himself enough to open space for others' arguments and perspectives.

Contrary to what might be expected, when humans come ready to argue before the God of the Hebrew Bible, it is not from a passive, subservient position. Biblical figures are as vigorous with the Almighty as they might be with a judge in a court of law, adding force to their claims to bring what Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca call "presence" to the argumentation—and making available a "rowdiness" some believe are critical for public deliberation (Ivie). The biblical figure of Job, for example, *demands* to confront God and know the reason for all his suffering. He angrily rails against the injustice that he perceives, declaring that God "destroys the innocent and the wicked" (Job 9:22). His wish is granted and God answers him with a noteworthy sarcasm: "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? ... Have you ever in your life commanded the morning, or told the dawn its place" (Job 38:4, 12)? Job's response to the cosmic imbalance between his mortal position and the course of action to which his maker has committed is an eloquent appeal against the incongruity: "Though He [God] slay me; I will have hope in Him; Yet I will argue my case before Him" (Job 13:15). Cohen thinks that the absurdities at the heart of many biblical stories like Job's formed the basis for much Jewish humor (45–68), a world "endlessly incomprehensible, always baffling, a world that is beyond us and yet our world" (60). Yet we would add that, where a classically tragic response might have seen Job narrowing his outlook and giving into the unfolding fate, his statement is comically oriented in both bisociating between congruous and incongruous planes and in the refusal to resign himself without further argumentation with the deity.

These are just some examples of mortals who have no problem disagreeing with God. They may have learned this from Adam who, after eating from the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, tries to justify his behavior by blaming it on God—a lame argument, but an argument nonetheless. Adam tells God, "The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate" (Genesis 3:12). Adam becomes a comic character in the argument, both by having the nerve to blame God and by passing the responsibility for his actions onto his wife. Other biblical figures like Cain are not much better. After Cain kills his brother Abel, God asks him a rhetorical question "'Where is Abel your brother?'; and [Cain] said, 'I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper'" (Genesis 4:9)? Rather than striking Cain dead with a lightning bolt, God dialogues with him in an ironic inquiry, inviting the mortal's justifications for the murder. God's sense of irony is further manifest in his discussion with Abraham about naming his soon-to-be-born son "Isaac" (the Hebrew name Yitzchak [Isaac in English] means "he laughed"). Abraham laughed when he heard that he, a one-hundred-year-old man, and Sarah, his 90-year-old wife, would have a child (Genesis 17:19). At least in these situations, that God could not only take the laughter but nominalized Abraham's reaction speaks to the deity's acceptance of the "process" of dialogic encounters, even if He may disagree with the argumentative "products" humans provide during such moments (see O'Keefe).

1.2 The Talmud

The *Talmud* is the compilation of Jewish oral law and consists of the *mishna* and the *gemara*. The *mishna* was compiled and redacted by Rebbi (Rabbi Yehuda the *Nasi* who was president of the Sanhedrin) about the year 189 C.E. The *gemara* consists mainly of commentaries and discussions of the *mishna* and was put into written form about 1,500 years ago. The *Midrash*, which is essentially devoted to the exposition of Biblical verses, is of two types: the *Halachic Midrash*, which is mainly concerned with Jewish law, and the *Aggadic Midrash*, which is homiletic and mainly concerned with morality. Several scholars note that many of the homiletic portions of the Talmud and Midrash were not meant to be taken literally, but were intended to inspire or to provide hints about the world's mysteries (Chajes 195; Maimonides, Chap. 10). In particular, in the Talmud people mostly argue with one another to understand God's laws. The Talmud and Midrash have had a strong influence on the Jewish people, and are filled with stories and different types of humor, including humor involving God. As we find, these emphases upon argument and humor as ways to create understanding encourage the proliferation of perspectives through dissoi logoi and bisociation.

In one Talmudic story, God asks for a blessing from Rabbi Yishmael b. Elisha, a High Priest. The story not only depicts God asking a mere mortal for a blessing—lowering his status to accommodate human communication—but highlights how the rabbi comically turns the tables on God, simultaneously requesting a blessing that will benefit the Jewish people:

Rabbi Yishmael b. Elisha said: I once entered the innermost part of the Temple to offer incense and I saw that God, the Lord of Hosts, was seated on a high and lofty throne. He said to me: Yishmael, My son, bless me. I said to Him: May it be Your will that Your compassion should suppress Your anger and that Your compassion prevail over all Your other attributes so that You should treat Your children with the attribute of mercy and You should stop short of the strict letter of the law for them. And God nodded to me with His head. (Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 7a)

Contrary to an image of the deity only barking orders at humankind, passages like these demonstrate the God of the Hebrew Bible's flexibility, both in terms of his ability to violate expectations (i.e. the rabbi blessing God) and remain open to human arguments and the possibility of changing his mind.

Indeed, humor often arises in these texts when human beings fail to reciprocate and engage in a dialogic encounter with the divine. As this next passage from the Talmud shows, God can be satirical and expects to be greeted just as any mortal would. God was insulted when Moses, who went up to heaven for 40 days, ignored and did not wish Him well on His handiwork:

Rabbi Yehoshua b. Levi said: At the time that Moses ascended to Heaven, he found the Holy One tying crowns on the letters of the Torah. God said to him: Moses, in your town people do not give greetings? Moses replied: Is it then proper for a servant to extend greetings to his master? God said to him: You

should have wished me success. Moses then said to Him (Numbers 14:17):
 “And now let the power of the Lord be great, as You once declared.”
 (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 89a)

Moses’ response was close to a traditional Jewish way of congratulating someone on a job well done by blessing her or him with the strength to continue. Before Moses’ concession at the end of the passage, his dilemma of what to wish God can also be seen as humorous (and reminiscent of an old joke, “What do you say when God sneezes? You bless You?”), and typical of the master-servant dynamic at the center of much comic dialogue (see Johnstone). The surprise of God’s desire to both communicate and metacommunicate with his subjects about standards for engagement grounds interactivity as equally if not more important than hierarchy.

While hierarchy may certainly exist between mortals and the immortal figure, it is a hierarchy where argument and humor can upset the balance of power so that unending and expansive relational dialogue frequently becomes more significant than particular outcomes in human-divine communication. The story of Choni HaMagil (the Circle Maker) demonstrates that Choni’s relationship with the Creator was very much like that of a son to a father. The relationship exhibits Choni’s impatience with his Creator’s processes, with God playfully toying with each of Choni’s requests. During a time when rainfall was desperately needed, Choni gave God an ultimatum that he would not remove himself from a small circle in the dirt until rain came. God first taunts Choni with a light drizzle, followed by an overwhelming deluge (“the sages estimated that no raindrop was less than one lug”), before finally delivering the kind of rain the people needed (Babylonian Talmud, Taanit 23a).

Choni’s inflexible ultimatum to God can be seen as a commitment to operate on a single plane of thought. God’s answers force Choni to bisociate his position with other, unexpected frames that follow but prank the request to expand communicative space—with “rain” acting as a link between these different planes. In the story, God uses the humorous bisociation to underscore a need for more patience and tolerance than Choni has admitted, with humor in some sense even setting the grounds for a relationship in which good argumentation can take place. Telushkin sees this story as proving that God is a “primordial joker” (146), but we would also note how understating and overstating (both classic comic devices) the rain from above sought a reaction from Choni. Like a stand-up comedian who misdirects audience expectations at each turn in her or his act to create an involving discourse, the God portrayed in these Talmudic texts plays to engage humanity.

In another Talmudic story involving the poverty-stricken Rabbi Elazar b. Pedath, God admits that the world is sometimes unjust and that he would have to remake it to change the sad plight of some unfortunates, and asks the rabbi: “would it please you if I turned the world back to its very beginnings? Perhaps then you might be born at a more auspicious time for achieving sustenance” (Babylonian Talmud, Taanit 25a). In exchange for not having to turn back time, God tells Elazar that He will make it up to him in the next world and describes the reward (“I will provide for you in the next world thirteen rivers of pure balsam oil, which you will be able to enjoy”), to which the rabbi laughs and exclaims “Only that and nothing more?” The

argument continues, with God responding to the rabbi's taunts with the rhetorical question: "Then what will be left for Me to give to your colleagues?" Not letting his Creator off the hook, the rabbi makes the case that more justice is demanded: "Am I asking from someone who has nothing?," to which God responds by flicking his finger on the rabbi's forehead (25a).

With the finger flicking at the end, the passage reads a bit like a Three Stooges dialogue. But the spirit of the exchange should not be lost: God accepts humor and argument as an important means of *vertical* communication between himself and his creation, and by implication as a model for *horizontal* communication between people. Different than the Choni story, where God uses bisociative frames to encourage expanded argumentative space, here the rabbi would have God toggle between a world in which His promises are satisfactory and another world in which those same promises are seen as underwhelming or stingy. The example speaks to how Talmudic texts encourage bisociative reasoning from both above and below, enabling a "refusal to remain a creature of habit, governed by a single set of 'rules of the game'" (Koestler 63). Moreover, Rabbi Solomon Ben Isaac—usually referred to as Rashi (1040–1105), a major commentator on the Bible and Talmud—explained that the "flicking" action was an expression of love. God actually enjoyed Rabbi Elazar's retort so much that the action was an admission that He could probably afford to give his servant a better reward. Spaulding further notes how those "nearest and dearest to their hearts" are the targets of much Jewish humor, which "radiates affection—a kiss with salt on the lips, but a kiss nevertheless" (xvi).

While the omniscient can take a playful approach to communication between himself and his subjects, at other times his laughter also turns more serious. Humankind's arguments with the deity are still subject to *judgments*, as outlined by a Talmudic passage where God underscores how he will act toward nations that have forsaken his offers: "The Holy One will sit and laugh at them, as it is written (Psalms 2:4): 'He who sits in Heaven shall laugh' (Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah 2b–3b).

Yet, like the Hebrew Bible, the Talmud often spotlights God's openness to suggestions from mortals, and his willingness to change His mind when "wrong," a state that ought to be impossible for a perfect deity.⁶ One story about Rabbah b. Shila portrays God as someone who studies the law and even quotes mortals (Babylonian Talmud, Chagigah 15b), despite being the one who gave the law to the Israelites. Who ought to know better what the law entails, the giver or the receiver? Who ought to know best what is in the heart of humans, God or Rabbah? Human

⁶ The Talmud also describes a situation in which God admitted that He made a "mistake." In response to Moses' inquiry into God's name, the text explains the meaning of God's reply in Exodus as "I Will Be What I Will Be" (Exodus 3:14). (Note: most translators translate this name as "I Am Who I Am," even although, grammatically, the words that make up the name are in the future tense—*Ehyeh* means "I will be"). God instructed Moses to tell the Israelites, "I shall be with them in this servitude just as I will be with them in other servitudes." Moses hence told God: "They have enough troubles now; you do not have to tell them about future troubles." God agreed with Moses' argument and subsequently instructed him to tell the Israelites (Exodus 3:14): "I Will Be has sent me" (Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 9b).

reasoning plays a significant part in demonstrating that God's omniscient acts include tacit concessions and comic turns from singular points of view:

Rabbah b. Shila once encountered Elijah the Prophet [who reveals himself to great people]. He asked him: What is the Holy One doing? Elijah answered: He is quoting legal decisions in the names of all the Rabbis, but not in the name of Rabbi Meir. Rabbah asked: Why? Elijah answered: Because Rabbi Meir studied laws from the mouth of *acher* [literally, *the other*, a name given to Rabbi Elisha b. Avuyah who became a heretic]. Rabbah explained: Rabbi Meir found a pomegranate, he ate the fruit on the inside and discarded the peel. Elijah answered: Now God is saying, "Meir, my son, says ..." (Babylonian Talmud, Chagigah 15b)

When Rabbah explains that another rabbi only culled the good in learning from Acher and discarded the bad, God accepts this reasoning and starts quoting Rabbi Meir. In doing so, He remains attentive to the ways that "an advocate's discourse implicitly or explicitly widens or narrows discursive space for others" (Asen, "Ideology" 263). Not even God is beyond changing his mind, if people are willing to prepare good reasons in support of their cases.

With some caveats, God is frequently portrayed by Talmudic texts as bringing a playful orientation to bear on his love of argumentation. Rabbi Eliezer b. Hyrkanos, who was of the Shammai school, refused to go along with the majority in a dispute regarding the oven of Aknai, and whether it could become ritually unclean. To prove his point, Rabbi Eliezer performed various miracles, which were all ignored. Finally,

Rabbi Eliezer said: If the law is as I say, let it be proven from Heaven. A Heavenly voice then rang out and exclaimed: What do you want with Rabbi Eliezer, since the law is in agreement with him in all areas. Rabbi Yehoshua then got up on his feet and declared: "It [the Torah] is not in Heaven" (Deuteronomy 30:12). What does "It is not in Heaven" mean? Rabbi Yirmiyah said: Since the Torah was already given at Sinai, we therefore pay no attention to Heavenly voices. After all, it is written in the Torah itself: "After the majority one must follow" (Exodus 23:2). Rabbi Nathan met Elijah the Prophet and asked him: What was God doing at that time [when His Heavenly voice was disregarded]? Elijah answered: *He laughed and said: My children have triumphed over me. My children have triumphed over me.* (Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metzia 59b; emphasis added)

In this passage, God laughs when He realizes that mortals refuse to accept Him as the final authority on everything, since "The Torah is no longer in heaven." The story shows God as being interested in the law and ineffectively trying to influence the outcome of a legal debate. We should note that there are further complications and paradoxes to the rest of this story; it does not end particularly well for Rabbi Eliezer, who is excommunicated, nor for his excommunicator, whom God strikes dead (see Luban 1253–1288). The rabbis' deductive allegiance to texts in the face of incoming evidence—as well as God's vacillating judgments and ways of approaching humans' decisions—could equally be called into question in this case.

But we would also note that God is frequently portrayed throughout the *Torah* as a “judge” who listens to and decides on human arguments, and as passages like the oven of Aknai partially recognize, playfully laughs at being bested by others’ arguments in a manner that belies a fundamentalist position at one of the story’s most critical points.

That said, God often wins the argument, as another story about Rabbah b. Nachmeni spotlights (Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metzia 86a). Remarkably, even in these accounts God is described as needing the help of a mortal who was “unique in his knowledge of the laws of leprosy” to make a convincing case (86a). When it comes to a legal dispute, even one between God and the angels in heaven, a well-trained expert can expand the grounds of argument to resolve the dispute, illustrating the comic frame and broad circumference (Burke) with which the Almighty can approach humans.⁷

1.3 The Midrash

As in other foundational Jewish religious texts, the Midrash portrays playful and humorous argument with God as a good worth preserving. Even God’s precedents are fair game for change if human beings can make a smart or entertaining case for better values or principles. Different than what might be expected, much of this literature characterizes God as interested in abductive and flexible, casuistic reasoning rather than simply unchanging, universalizing deductions (on “casuistry,” see Jonsen and Toulmin). There is a Midrash that points out three places where Moses disagreed with God and was told, “You have taught me” (Midrash Numbers Rabbah 19:33). One example is in reference to the verse: “visiting the sin of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me” (Exodus 20:5). Moses retorts to God that many wicked people have righteous children. For example, Abraham’s father, Terach, was an idol worshipper, yet Abraham was virtuous, making God’s potential punishment for the parents’ iniquities inconsistent and unjust. God agrees and then states in the Torah “Fathers shall not be put to death because of their children, nor shall children be put to death because of their fathers. Each one shall be put to death for his own sin” (Deuteronomy 24:16). These books show that God does not mind being taught by mortals, often maintaining a tolerant comic stance toward incoming information.

As opposed to a picture of God always chastising humans for challenges to his power, these scriptures exemplify the use of humor to draw God’s attention to human cases. According to the Midrash (and the aforementioned example from the Hebrew Bible), Moses tried several good arguments on God to convince Him not to punish the Jewish people. For example,

Moses said to God: Why are you angry with the Israelites? Is it not because they made an idol [the golden calf]? You never told them not to do this. God replied to Moses: Did I not say in the second commandment (Exodus 20:3), “Thou shalt have no other gods before me?” Moses replied: You did not

⁷ Maimonides, who wrote the encyclopedic compilation of Talmudic law, can also be found disagreeing with God (Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Leprosy 2:9).

command them, you commanded me, since You did not say, “You [plural] shalt not have ...” It was thus only me that You commanded. Hence, if I have made an idol (Exodus 32:32), “Blot me, please, out of Your book.” (Midrash Exodus Rabbah 47:9)

Moses to God: gotcha. The second commandment states: *Lo yihyeh lecha not Lo yihyeh lachem*. *Lachem* (to you) is plural and *lecha* (to you) is singular. The argument was the kind that an adroit defense lawyer might make when looking for a loophole in a legal document, wittily holding the prosecutor to his own standards by digging into a single word choice upon which the entire case could turn. *Lecha* acts as a bisociative link between a frame in which God’s grand principles apply to a nation and another in which their scope is more limited. Puncturing elevated language and diminishing the grandiose are classic comic structures (Berger, *The Art* 10, 41), which in this case also function to construct an argument circumscribing the boundaries of God’s claim.

The *quality* of argumentation still remains a vital part of such encounters, however. While a range of Judaic texts show God’s willingness to entertain playful arguments with his creation, he still critically assesses the reasons and standards by which they are conducted. One Midrash (Numbers Rabbah 20:6) notes that two individuals—Cain and Balaam—did not respond correctly to God. They should have known that an omniscient God was asking the question to begin a conversation, hoping that they would show remorse (i.e. each question was rhetorical and not supposed to be answered in the way the three individuals responded). God asked Cain “Where is Abel your brother?” A correct response might have been: “You are omniscient and know where he is.” Cain’s reply was “I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper” (Genesis 4:9)? God also asked Balaam “who are these men with you” (Numbers 22:9)? Claiming to be God’s prophet, Balaam should have known that the Lord knew who the men were and what they wanted, and thus that His question was rhetorical. Instead, Balaam answers the question.

More than the other works, the Midrash is especially clear about how God himself should engage in argumentation rather than coercion with humankind. He largely attempts to persuade entire nations to join him in a communicative relationship, but does not force these encounters on the unwilling. There is one episode that portrays God trying to sell his “wares” to the countries of the world. He goes to the descendants of Esau, who question what is in the Torah and refuse to engage with God because they, well, really like murder. God receives similar treatment from “the children of Ishmael,” for whom stealing is quite a lark, and the “children of Ammon and Moab,” who make it clear that adultery and incest are high on their list of commitments. In the end, “there was no nation among the nations that God did not go to, speak to, and knock at their door” (Sifre Deuteronomy 33:2). The manner in which the Midrash depicts God as a kind of door-to-door salesperson trying to peddle His Torah to each of the nations has a humorous bent, bisociating between God as immortal ruler of the universe and God as mortal marketer. Through such bisociations, humans can escape their “more or less automatized routines of thinking and behaving,” linking “previously

unconnected matrices of experience” (Koestler 45) to create understanding. This Midrash is cited in many places across Jewish theological texts, showing that in the end, and with some comic desperation, God only finds one customer for His Torah.

As with human relationships, if communication between the deity and His creation were perfect, there would simply be no need for argumentation. Once Israel and God establish a covenant with one another, the Midrash warrants argumentation precisely because of the imperfections of mortal-immortal discourse, which further fuels the humor in these events. The next Midrash shows how the Jewish people later used their unique status relative to other nations to justify praying to God after the Temple’s destruction:

The Holy One said to Israel: You are acting impudently [by praying to me after I have driven you out of Israel]. They replied: Creator of the Universe, it is appropriate and proper that we do so, for no other nation accepted your Torah except for us. God replied: I was the One who disqualified all the nations for your sake. The Jewish people said to God: If so, why did you take Your Torah around to every nation and they did not accept it? (Midrash Lamentations Rabbah 3:1)

In a sense, the passage reads like a married couple having an argument as to who had been pursuing whom in the marriage. Like a human partnership, the texts entertain the possibility that the relationship between the nation and God also requires continual attention, with back-and-forth arguments playing an important part in keeping the relationship going. This analogy is brought home in the Midrash’s parable of a king who throws out his queen and, then, seeing her later clinging to the pillar of the palace, says to her: “You are acting impudently” (Midrash Lamentations Rabbah 3:1). The queen replies that she is “acting appropriately since no other woman would accept you except for me.” The dialogue continues with the king pleading that “I was the one who disqualified all women for you,” to which the queen finally replies, “If so, why did you enter that street, that yard, and that place? Were you not rejected by all the women there” (3:1)? The queen points to how the king’s short-sighted, narrow data humorously bypasses some important empirical evidence justifying her actions. In a theme we see across many of these texts, advocates bring together argument and humor to maintain that *broader* perspectives are necessary to the case at hand.

The very closeness of the relationship between Israel and God allows for argumentation to flow easily. Due to this intimacy, we also find examples in the Midrash of humans holding God accountable for the quality of his own arguments with humankind. God sometimes blames in a way that—at least by human standards—could be thought unfair. According to the Midrash, Moses does not let Him get away with it, as in a passage where God tells Moses that the people who he led out of Egypt had been corrupted. Moses questions the Lord on this point, first with a rhetorical question, and then with a claim and evidence from the Torah countering the assertion: “when they are sinners, they are mine, and when they are righteous, they are Yours? Whether they are sinners or righteous they are Yours, since it is written (Deuteronomy 9:29): ‘They are Your people and Your heritage’” (Pesikta D’Rav Kahana, Pesikta 16). In this Midrash, God engages in the fallacious

reasoning of a parent, who, when disappointed in the actions of a child, tells his spouse, “Look what *your* child has done” (see also Friedman 280). Moses asks God to return to a universe of discourse where His very forms of reasoning are more internally consistent than the one He sets forth in his initial charges. Like many Talmudic tales, human beings argue, negotiate, and even playfully best God.

1.4 Chassidic Tales and Other Jewish Literature

Treating God in an informal and familiar manner is common in Chassidic tales, which have certainly been influenced by Talmudic stories. In Chassidic narratives, God is often chided, albeit in a warm and satirical manner, for the harshness of the Diaspora and for not helping His people. Indeed, since the Jewish people have known a great deal of dispersion and diaspora (Spaulding xiv), the itinerant experience of having to live in two or more cultures has likely encouraged a bisociative lens in which argumentation and doubled-perspectives have become a norm. Under diasporic conditions, the crossings of one language into another often produces humor (Avner 599), which bears a resemblance to Koestler’s point that “the confrontation with an alien matrix reveals in a sharp, pitiless light what we failed to see in following our dim routines” (73), corresponding with an ability to produce *dissoi logoi* or the “two accounts ... present about every ‘thing’” (Schiappa, *Protagoras* 100).

In one classic story, three Chassidic rabbis—Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk, Rabbi Israel of Koznitz, and the Seer of Lublin—acted as the Jewish court in a suit brought by an individual against God. Their verdict was that the plaintiff was right and God was wrong for allowing the emperor to issue an edict against the Jews. God had no choice but to obey the final verdict of the court, annulling the decree (Buber 258). As a bearer of abstract standards like mercy and judgment,⁸ which often conflict in actual human situations, God subjects himself to the same contingent environment humans face in their decision-making. Argumentation becomes important in these encounters to keep decisions from being radically relativistic, with the claims, evidence, and warrants upon which principles might be followed continually made available for argumentative processes.

A satirical quality permeates these texts, with God as the target of critiques. The famous Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, known as the Berditchever, once declared to God that if He did not forgive the Jewish people their sins, he would tell the whole world that God’s phylacteries were invalid. According to the Talmud (Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 6a), God’s phylacteries contain the verse “who is like Your people Israel, a unique nation on earth” (I Chronicles 17:21). Rabbi Levi Yitzchak exclaimed that if God did not forgive Israel its sins then it could not possibly be a “unique nation on earth,” putting his very phylacteries into question. Raising the stakes, on another occasion the rabbi scolded God and said: “The Jewish people are your phylacteries. When one of the phylacteries of a simple Jew falls on the ground he picks it up carefully and kisses it. Dear Lord! Your phylacteries have fallen to the ground” (Buber 222).

⁸ For an extended treatment of this topic, see Kidder.

As Dreyfus explains, arguments from consequences aim “not to establish a point but merely to draw the consequences of previous statements and bring out the contradictions or absurdities entailed by these statements” (47). Rabbi Levi Yitzchak combines the exasperation and amusement of a raconteur with an argument from consequences model that asks God to follow the implications of his principles and premises. The rabbi bisociates a context in which phylacteries could be seen as disembodied rules against a separate context underscoring that rules mean little if not embodied in one form or another. In one story the Berditchever even chides a tailor for not making a *more* forceful and reciprocal argument when telling God: “You, O Lord, have committed grievous sins: You have taken away babies from their mothers, and mothers from their babies. Let us be quits: may You forgive me, and I will forgive You.” The Rabbi humorously indicts the tailor for understating the argument: “Why did you let God off so easily? You might have forced Him to redeem all of Israel” (Laytner 184).

In other Jewish literature, God is also portrayed in a disputational but playful and amicable manner. For example, Sholom Aleichem’s unforgettable character, Tevye the dairyman (best known from the play *Fiddler on the Roof*), had Job-like conversations with God: “O God, All-powerful and All-Merciful, great and good, kind and just, how does it happen that to some people you give everything and to others nothing” (Aleichem 57)? In the middle of his prayer, Tevye would interject his own personal, humorous comments toward the Creator: “Thou sustainest the living with loving kindness—and, sometimes, with a little food” (50). He could even be sarcastic at times: “With God’s help, I starved to death ... three times a day, not counting supper” (48). Tevye may have learned to criticize God from Abraham who often had the temerity to disapprove of God’s judgments by asking questions such as, “Shall the Judge of the whole world not act justly” (Genesis 18:25)?

While playful argumentation can be seen throughout Jewish texts, a desire to debate with God can also be seen as borne out of pain and horror. A desire to critique and argue with God’s decisions and world is extensive throughout Jewish literature, especially in modern works dealing with some of the worst atrocities committed against the Jewish people. As an example, Elie Weisel’s play *Trial of God*, set in 1649, tells the story of three nomadic actors who arrive in a Ukranian village and find that almost all the Jewish inhabitants were killed in a pogrom. They conduct a mock trial of God for permitting such awful things to happen. Weisel based the play on a trial that he saw in Auschwitz as a boy, where three rabbis tried God for allowing His children to be butchered by the Nazis. From the viewpoint of our analysis, the problem of evil becomes less a philosophical problem than a bisociative disjunct between a noumenal context in which God’s words and promises have form and the empirical, anthropological realities and disorienting logics his subjects have faced (see O’Leary). Under these types of circumstances, authors of Jewish literature have petitioned the transcendent being for more reasoning and reasonability than Jews have often been provided.

2 Joking with God

Arguing with God, criticizing God, and even suing God—with this rich tradition to draw on, is it any wonder that many Jews continue to treat God, omnipotent and omniscient though He is, as a member of the family subject to humor and teasing? The importance of argumentation with the Almighty provides an important foundation for also joking with and about God, which flies in the face of deductive fundamentalist approaches to the kind of communication possible between mortals and the divine figure.

As Lipset and Raab argue, “the application of any ‘fundamental’—that is, revealed—truth to the political scene, being undebatable, makes impossible the open market place of ideas and powers” (12). Humor’s capacity to expand communicative frames broadens the potential for argumentation to move beyond the solidified and monolithic tendencies of fundamentalism. Since one function of humor is to minimize the distance between the sacred and the profane (Hyers 220), humor in which God plays a role can make the Almighty seem closer to humankind, making the search for truth an “intersubjective” (see Goodwin) matter across Jewish traditions.

Many modern Jewish figures jest with the Almighty. The comedy of Woody Allen has always had an argumentative bent. He often combines humor with pointed critiques toward God in his jokes, as in his reference to “the sacred Jewish holiday commemorating God’s reneging on every promise” (Novak and Waldoks 201). Like Wiesel’s far more serious example, Allen bisociates between noumenal and phenomenal contexts in this joke. Yet Allen’s famously self-deprecating humor also demonstrates an important characteristic of both humor and argument, namely, reflexivity. To be able to make fun of oneself underscores a possibility that alternate frames of reference should always be available beyond fixed identities (see Waisanen, “Toward”). To argue well also requires a reflexive orientation to continually examine and re-examine one’s own and others arguments.

Indeed, Novak and Waldoks note how “Jewish humor mocks everyone—including God” (xxi). While “mock” may be too strong a word, Jewish humor involving God often has a biting edge. Telushkin writes that Jewish jokes aimed at God are “ironic digs, rather than belly laughs,” citing the following exemplar:

A man brings some very fine material to a tailor and asks him to make a pair of pants. When he comes back a week later, the pants are not ready. Two weeks later they are still not ready. Finally after six weeks the pants are ready. The man tries them on. They fit perfectly. Nonetheless, when it comes time to pay, he can’t resist a jibe at the tailor. “You know,” he says, “it took God only six days to make the world. And it took you six weeks to make just one pair of pants.” “Ah,” the tailor says. “But look at this pair of pants, and look at the world!” (143–144)

Bisociating God’s creation against clothing repair through the pants/world link fashions an argument in which the tailor’s practices can be seen as potentially less enigmatic than the Almighty’s.

In a similar spirit, there is a famous cartoon by Edward Sorel titled “Exodus Unexpurgated.” In it the Israelites cross the Red Sea, but instead of being overwhelmed by one of the greatest miracles of all time—the splitting of the sea—the Jewish people kvetch. Every individual has another complaint: “My feet are killing me”; “From this smell you could plotz”: “My back is killing me”; “You call this parting the sea? Look! The water is up to my ankles”; “I told you not to shlep all that stuff”; and “If he’s so smart, why doesn’t he make these dead fish disappear” (Sorel)? Such cartoons are not seen as blasphemous; rather, since God is part of the family, he has to expect to be kidded. In their classic book of Jewish humor, Novak and Waldoks also include a number of cartoons supposedly depicting what happened on Mount Sinai when God gave the Torah to the Jewish people. In one, Moses is cutting the tablets in half so that he only brings ten of the 20 commandments to the people. The most absurd one has Moses with a duck on his head holding the tablets. God states: “I was talking to the duck!!! Ha Ha Ha Ha ...” (213).

In examples like these, Jewish humor involving God makes a point about the unfairness of life, the imperfections of the world, or the unjustness of the Diaspora. Since God is the One to blame for the plight of His people, He is fair game for humor—after all, He is omnipotent and omniscient. Each of the jokes toggle between two realities, one serious and one playful, demonstrating that humans should not have unswerving viewpoints when it comes to divine matters.

Jewish jokes are full of taunts from the top-down too, representing God as actively producing humor and giving as good as He gets, as in the following joke:

A rabbi loves golfing so much that on Yom Kippur, he leaves his house very early in the morning before services to play a quick nine holes. An angel looks down from heaven and sees what is happening and is appalled by what the rabbi is doing. He tells God. The rabbi strikes the ball and hits a hole in one. The same thing happens at the second hole, the third hole, and all nine holes. The rabbi keeps hitting holes in one; nine holes in one, a feat never accomplished by anyone in the history of golf. The angel is horrified. “Almighty Lord,” he said, “you call this a punishment?” God answers: “Absolutely! Who can he tell?” (Novak and Waldoks 127)

From a God’s-eye perspective, it must be quite funny looking down upon all the incongruities manifest in human communication. It must have been quite humorous, for instance, seeing that the prophet Jonah would have known that God was omniscient and omnipresent, yet felt that he could escape the Almighty by fleeing to Tarshish (Jonah 1–3).

Some jokes about God do not have to be Jewish and, in fact, have appeared in both Jewish and Christian collections of humor. Despite major and minor disagreements among the faiths, common themes such as suffering, human fallibility, and asking God “why” all arise through jokes. One example involves Jacob, a religious man who refuses the help of rescue boats and helicopters during a flood, stating that “God will take care of me.” Eventually he drowns, is taken up to heaven, and demands to know why the Lord did not save him, to which God states: “Well, I sent you two boats and a helicopter. What else did you want me to do”

(Mallow 65)? As Heller notes, humor can prevent human beings from over-identifying with particular creeds or beliefs (202). Similarly, while Jacob clung to a discursive universe in which the divine figure was expected to abide by human rules, God's response uses the two boats and helicopter as a link to another frame urging that the same situation be perceived in another way—an argument that Jacob use interpretive humility in seeing that God's reasoning may come in different forms.

Other jokes manifest the humorous tensions that characterize any relationship, as in the mountain climber who grabs a branch during an avalanche and is told to let go of it by God. The mortal looks upward and asks, "Is there someone else up there I could talk to" (Mallow 66)? Overall, there is a wealth of humor today in which God plays a part, particularly on the Internet, where *YouTube* and other new media sites exhibit the production and distribution of highly spreadable content across the globe (see Jenkins, Ford, and Green).

3 Conclusion

God is frequently portrayed in both the Hebrew Bible as well as Rabbinic literature as One who can be argued with. He even changes his mind. He is omnipotent but still wants to be blessed; He is omniscient but laughs when bested by His children. He is all-seeing and yet is told by the Psalmist: "Wake up! Rise to my defense" (Psalms 35:23)! This warm attitude and engagement vis-à-vis God has had a profound effect on Jewish humor and literature, even to this day, making playful argumentation using bisociation and dissoi logoi a prominent feature of Jewish theological and other literatures. The Talmud is filled with legalistic arguments in which no person is seen as infallible, and even has passages criticizing Abraham, Moses, Elijah, and other great Biblical figures. Playful argumentation creates the possibility of joking with God and toying with the contours of religious devotion. According to a well-known joke, even Jews on desert islands have to build two synagogues: the one they pray in and the one they never attend.

One implication from this analysis is that people and groups following Hebraic traditions ought to take seriously and playfully God's desire for dialogue and reciprocity. Jewish theological and similar texts resound with examples demonstrating that interactivity is as important as hierarchy. At many junctures, we find the God of Judaic traditions listening to people, but also making arguments with them in the hope of establishing a relationship where further communication can take place—similar to Pearce and Pearce's concept of "dialogic virtuosity," an approach "that enable[s] people to speak so that others can and will listen, and to listen so that others can and will speak" (162; see also Waisanen, "Toward"). Far from propagandistic communication from above, we often find the God described in Jewish texts open "to arguments for and against any particular conclusion, rather than close[d] ... to the possibility of any conclusion but one" (Carey 20). As such, Jewish literatures portray a divine figure attentive to the type of communicative principle Booth also advances: "Whatever imposes belief without personal engagement becomes inferior to whatever makes mutual exploration more likely"

(137). Both the processes and products of argumentation are underscored as valuable in these encounters, unleashing peoples' deliberative capacities, or as Cooke defines it, "an unconstrained exchange of arguments that involves practical reasoning and always potentially leads to a transformation of preferences" (948). In essence, if there are fundamentals to draw in religious and social matters, a run through Jewish literatures shows recurrently that God would have humans hold them as tentative at best.

Another implication from this project is that argumentation can and should prevent humanly created symbols from becoming overly reified, which can be an obstacle to further discourse between humans and the Almighty, and between people themselves. In particular, humor's capacity to bisociate between different domains of human experience and argumentation's emphases upon disjunctive logic act as structural forms of reasoning that can prevent reification. Postman once defined fanaticism as "falling in love ... with certain sentences" (104). In this vein, it is interesting that God does not treat all of his rules (which come to human beings in the form of words and sentences) as beyond amendment or alternate interpretations. In an important sense, the playful and often humorous argumentation exemplified across many Jewish texts show that God wants humans to be careful of "'real' definitions," which are "ethically suspect and philosophically problematic" in "demarcat[ing] our available 'reality'" (Schiappa, *Defining* pp. 41–43, 48). As these literatures portray, people can argue their cases—with an expectation that they bring their best reasons to the argumentative encounter—knowing that their pleas will be heard and judgment will be had in a way that is open to further communication.

Although some famous figures and biblical scholars have claimed that the ancient Jews had no sense of humor and that the God of the Bible does not laugh (for a brief overview, see Radday 21), on the contrary, a large body of ancient and modern literature shows that there are many possibilities for playful argumentation and humor within this tradition. The Psalmist states that "He who sits in Heaven shall laugh" (Psalms 2:4). Not only does God laugh, he especially enjoys when His children disagree with him. Arguing with God is not seen as a heinous sin but a noble cause if one has the right intentions. Indeed, the playfulness and humor seen within Jewish traditions frankly come from the less than "ideal speech situations" (as Habermas terms it) that often ensue when mortals and the immortal engage in argument. While both humans and the divine seek to communicate clearly with one another, mirth is produced by how much can go awry in such matters too—including misunderstandings, bad arguments, and failed expectations that bisociate between the real and the more ideal.

It is critical to note that more malevolent and even violent expressions can be found of God in the Hebrew Bible and similar religious texts. Chapters such as Ezekiel 16 and 23 complicate a picture of God as a consistent practitioner of communicative ethics. We should also point out that evidence of less than ecumenical and cosmopolitan views of argumentation might be seen in God's tendency to ultimately "win" in many of his exchanges with humans. These data demonstrate that there are limits to the humorous and argumentative nature of God we have drawn. At the same time, humor itself should not be seen as an unalloyed good. Scholars have underscored how positive and negative forms of humor can be

distinguished (e.g. Mcghee), with the latter often serving to dehumanize and desensitize others, as in racist or sexist humor (Lockyer and Pickering). Humor is not the salvation of humankind, nor should it become an end in itself when other, valid modes of communicating exist that might better address variable human situations (see Waisanen, “An Alternative”).

That said, our purpose in this analysis has been to shift attention toward the weight of sensitive and humane examples from Jewish texts that could easily be bypassed. The breadth of these data should have those influenced by these traditions—or simply searching for productive communication norms—consider the extent to which humor and argument *can* share a symbiotic relationship in advancing relatively tolerant and dialogic encounters. Arguers still value argumentative products and judgments within these examples. But if there is any counter our evidence offers to data showing God and others being less than inclusive, it is that human beings might at least take more pause about the speed with which such judgments are made, given the availability of multiple perspectives on any issue or event.

Peter Berger once asked why there are so many Jewish jokes, speculating that some answers might be found: historically, as Jewish culture has long valued verbal, clever storytelling; psychologically, given the suffering the Jewish people have faced; and sociologically, since Jewish “marginality makes for a comic perspective” (*Redeeming* xvii). We find an answer to Berger’s question further lies in argumentativeness; there’s many Jewish jokes because Jewish literatures have placed great emphasis upon the multiple perspectives encouraged by both humor and argumentation. Since there has been an increasing interaction between humor and argumentation in public culture (e.g. Smith and Voth), studies of how other religious systems have or have not combined reasoning and humor will remain an important area for investigation. As scholars continue to explore what forms and norms can best support engagement within or between faith traditions, in a world where more cultures are coming into contact than ever before (Lull), the stakes for such work remain high.

Sadly, religious fundamentalists and extremists often lack the ability to laugh at themselves, hindering the kind of “partial cosmopolitanism” necessary to the survival of the planet (Appiah xv). A run through Jewish literatures can counter fundamentalisms with argumentation and humor, constructing a Messianic vision of a united, peaceful world in which all people should learn to live and laugh together.

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