The mission of **Torah Is Geshmack** is to bring out the richness and enjoyment of Torah for everyone, and in doing so bring them closer to Hashem.

תשפ״ו

The Tehillim Sefer That Bothered Me: Gedolim Do Laugh

Dovid Kopel

I was looking into buying a new ספר תהלים for my child, and one sample page bothered me deeply. The page was on the first פסוקים of אשרי האיש, about not sitting in a מושב לצים (*seat of scoffers*). That is a serious יסוד. ליצנות (*scoffing*) is destructive. Cynicism eats away at a person. A Yid who lives with mockery, who looks down at everything holy, who can only sneer and tear things apart, is in a very dangerous place.

But then the sefer brought stories about גדולים in a way that, to me, felt very off. One story described Rav Chaim Kanievsky walking out of a שבע ברכות where a comedian was making people laugh. Another described Rav Akiva Eiger not responding positively when someone made a joking comment during a test for סמיכה (*ordination*).

I do not know the full context of either story. If Rav Chaim walked out of a שבע ברכות, then I am sure there was a reason. It must have been something very wrong; it was not stam that people were laughing. And yes, when a person is being tested for סמיכה, that is a serious setting. Not every moment is a time for a joke. But the way these stories were placed on the page creates a very troubling impression. A child can read this and walk away thinking that גדולים do not laugh. That יראת שמים (*fear of Heaven*) means being severe. That humor itself is suspect. That a true עובד ה׳ has no room for lightness, no room for warmth, no room for noticing the strange and funny ironies of life. That is not true.

And this is why we have to be very careful what we bring into our homes — especially in English. Children see a big publisher, a nice cover, clean typesetting, a famous name on the front, and they assume: this must be אמת. This must be the way to think. This must be what גדלות (*greatness*) looks like. That is a very scary thing. Because sometimes the danger is not something obviously wrong. Sometimes the danger is a distorted picture of תורה — a cold picture, a flattened picture, a picture where יראת שמים gets confused with severity, where קדושה gets confused with emotional distance, where גדולים are presented as if they were almost allergic to normal human warmth.

I once asked my Rebbe if humor is an important trait for a גדול, and he agreed that it is. Not just because of the famous moment with Rebbe Akiva laughing when the others cried at the foxes leaving the קודש הקדשים (*Holy of Holies*). That is certainly one example. But it is much broader than that. A גדול has to be able to see life clearly. And seeing life clearly means noticing its ironies. It means understanding people. It means being able to laugh. It means being able to poke fun — but with love. Not with שנאה (*hatred*). Not with bitterness. Not in a way that tears people down.

I have also heard wonderful stories of גדולים making sharp, funny comments to each other, poking fun at each other — not in a cruel way, not with שנאה, not to tear anyone down, but with warmth, with friendship, with that sharpness that comes from people who know each other, love each other, and are not afraid of a little human laughter. We are not a people devoid of humor. That was never the picture of תורה.

There is a reason so many of the stories we grew up with have a certain sharpness to them. A good line. A clever turn. A moment where a גדול says something that makes everyone smile, and also makes everyone think. That is not a מושב לצים. חז״ל tell us that רבה would begin his shiur with a מילתא דבדיחותא (*a light, humorous remark*), and the תלמידים would laugh. Then he would sit in awe and begin learning. That was not a contradiction to תורה. It was part of the way תורה was taught. The laughter opened the heart, and then the seriousness could enter.

My Rebbe opened every shiur with a joke. It usually was not so funny. In fact, sometimes he would confuse us so much that we did not understand the joke at all, and that itself made us laugh. A few times I remember him saying that he was יוצא (*fulfilled the obligation*) by making us laugh because we did not understand his joke. I am not sure that was his original intention. But it means something that I still remember it. I remember the smile. I remember the warmth. I remember the feeling that we were not just sitting in a room to be filled with information. We were with a Rebbe who cared about us, who wanted us to feel comfortable, who wanted the room to have life in it before the learning began.

A Rebbe does not have to be a comedian. That is not the job. And not every moment calls for a joke. Life is serious. תורה is serious. יראת שמים is serious. There are times for awe, times for silence, times when lightness is out of place. But life is also hard. People are carrying things. A little warmth, a smile, a well-placed joke can open the heart. That is not ליצנות. ליצנות is cold cynicism. It mocks what is holy and pushes people away. Healthy humor is different. It can come from humility, warmth, and love. It can help people breathe, connect, and receive תורה.

Of course, humor can become ugly. Of course, jokes can cross lines. A person can use humor to embarrass, to mock, to cheapen, to avoid seriousness, to turn everything meaningful into a punchline. That is not a small problem. That is exactly what דוד המלך is warning us about. But to flatten all humor into ליצנות is a terrible mistake.

We need children to see גדולים as real human beings — filled with תורה, יראת שמים, depth, discipline, and also warmth. They smiled. They understood people. They could laugh. They could see the absurdity of this world without becoming cynical about it. That balance matters. We should be זוכה to sit among גדולים who know that balance — גדולים who live with אמת, with יראת שמים, with seriousness, and also with warmth; who know when to cry, when to be silent, when to tremble, and also when to smile and laugh. And we should be זוכה to find that balance ourselves: to stay far away from ליצנות, from cynicism, from mockery, from anything that cheapens what is holy — but also to keep our hearts open, to laugh with love, to notice the ironies of life without becoming bitter, to poke fun without hatred, to bring warmth into our homes and into our learning. And may we soon laugh together with true שמחה, rejoicing in the coming of משיח צדקנו, במהרה בימינו.

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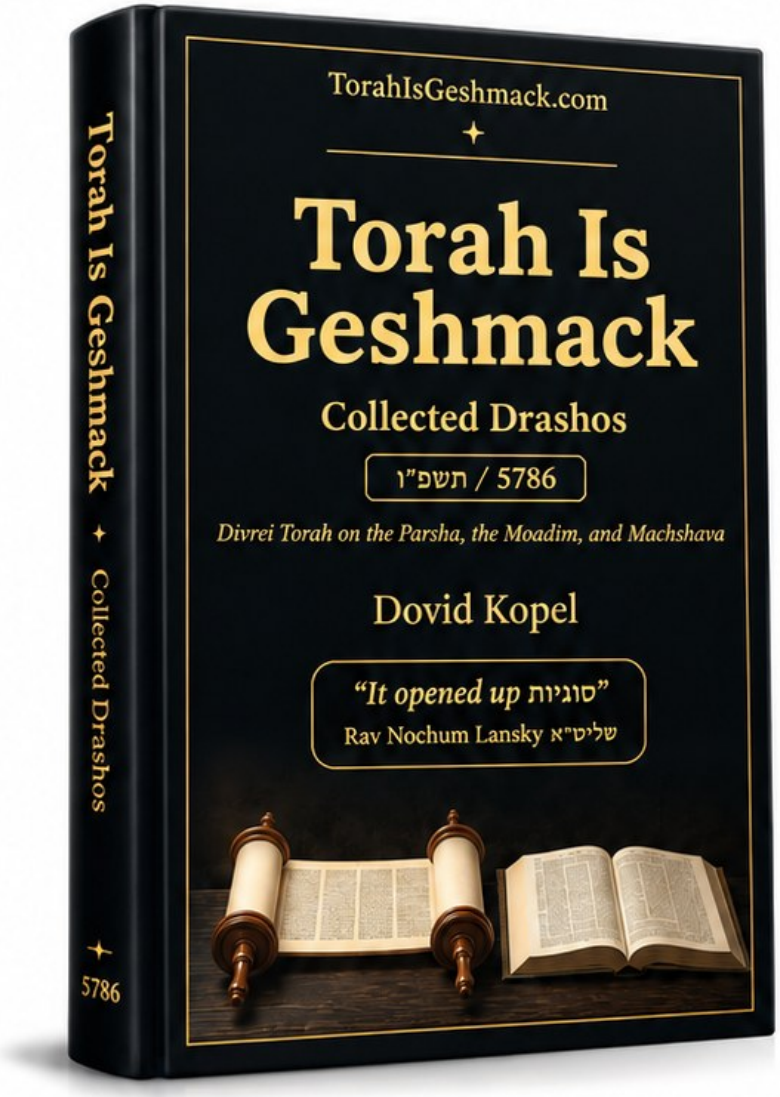
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