

Ephraim Kishon's "Lefi Ratzon" – "As much as You Like": the Metamorphosis of a Skit Across Languages and Cultures¹

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Abstract

This article will analyze the double metamorphosis of Ephraim Kishon's skit "As much as You Like". The first version is the original as it was written by Kishon for the "Two Shmuliks" Segal and Rodensky. The second is the Yiddish version performed by "Dzigan and Schumacher." The third is an adaptation of Yossi Banai for the "HaGashash HaHiver Trio." The purpose of this article is to analyze the textual metamorphosis of the skit, shedding light on various social and cultural structures in the transition across languages and cultures. This will enable us to draw conclusions about the society, the audience, and the specific cultural world of those who created and adapted the skit.

Keywords: Ephraim Kishon; skit; as much as you like; Dzigan and Schumacher; HaGashash HaHiver trio.

Introduction

A joke is a funny story only a few sentences long. It is constructed as a story with a beginning, middle, and end, or as a question and answer. A joke can be a complete work in and of itself, part of a longer comic piece (such as a skit), or integrated into a work whose main thrust is not humorous. A joke built like a story starts with an introduction, which sets the location and time for listeners and includes the main characters. In its second part, the body of the joke, the event or action—a sort of short story—unfolds, creating an expectation about the rest of the story. The third and last part is the punch line, an unexpected resolution that confounds listeners' expectations and creates a "comic gap" (Sover 2009, pp. 196–197). In a joke built in a question-and-answer format, the teller asks a question and the listener is supposed to answer it;

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but when the listener hears the teller's response, the listener's expectation is confounded and, again, a comic gap is created. The basic structure of the joke has an almost unlimited shelf life, yet as time passes the joke is likely to grow stale and there may be a need to revise it, especially if a joke has a satirical component. In that case, it is possible to preserve the core of the joke through certain modifications, such as changing the name of the characters when the original actors are no longer relevant, changing their professions, updating the language to a current idiom, or changing the butt of the joke and the criticism it is intended to make. A joke is primarily oral, so it has to be in the vernacular of the audience. Likewise, it must suit their culture and the social and political perspectives of the time it is told. At any given time, every group cultivates its own unique humor, which highlights both its unity and uniqueness. This shared sense of humor constitutes the basis for group bonding and serves as a touchstone for the integration of the individual into the group (Ziv 1981, p. 24). Changes in the group's values, lifestyle, and the fabric of power relations in the society will evoke changes in the humor that reflects them.

Bergson's social theory of humor claims that inflexibility vis-à-vis social life creates isolation from the shared center to which society is pulled. Humor suppresses extreme behavior and serves as a tool through which society seeks to differ itself (Bergson 1998, pp. 72–74). In fact, without humor a person who suffers from cognitive inflexibility because of his foreignness will find it difficult to adapt to the social life of the social group in which he lives and undergo a process of socialization. This is not solely a problem of the individual. Society, too, is concerned with an individual's behavior (Ziv 1981, 25). In this article I will look at the metamorphoses of Ephraim Kishon's skit "As much as You Like" when it was translated from one language to another (from Hebrew to Yiddish and then back to Hebrew) and from culture to culture—albeit within the same social group, which had evolved and changed over the years. This will enable us to draw conclusions about the society, the audience, and the specific cultural world of those who created and revised the joke.

Historical Background

The core of Ephraim Kishon's skit "As much as You Like" (Kishon 1959, 195–200) is an extended joke in which the client, Mr. Pashutman, asks the plumber how much he owes him for fixing a faucet. Instead of responding with an exact sum, the plumber

tells him to pay “as much as you like.” The dialogue between the client who is expecting to be told how much he should to pay, and the plumber, who refuses to specify an amount, is repeated over and over until the client goes crazy. (No doubt the name “Pashutman” [i.e., “ordinary” or “simple” fellow]), which is not common, is meant to be emblematic of the personality of the client who is interested in a simple reality, with no need for complex thinking, in contrast to the plumber, who repeatedly forces him to think in a complex and perhaps devious manner).

The skit was written in 1954 by Kishon for the “Two Shmuliks,” Shmuel Segal and Shmuel Rodensky. While they were working on the skit, a representative of the Mataté (Broom) theatre, which was on the verge of closing down, asked him for a skit. Kishon in turn asked Shmulik Segal to pass the skit on to them. Segal, who took pity on the Mataté actors, gave them the skit, thinking they would stage it only a few times before the theater closed; in fact, there were only a few performances (three or so). In the Mataté production, the client, Mr. Pashutman, was played by actor Bezalel London. Segal and Rodensky had begun working on the skit again when the Yiddish comic duo Dzigan and Schumacher came to Kishon and asked for material. Once again Kishon turned to Segal and asked him to pass on the skit. This time, Segal hesitated, because Dzigan and Schumacher were a very successful team and would give the skit broad play, so that he and Rodensky would no longer be able to use it. However, Kishon convinced Segal to let them have the skit, and as compensation wrote the famous “Histadrut House” sketch for the Two Shmuliks. Segal and Rodensky continued to perform the skit in Hebrew simultaneously with Dzigan and Schumacher, who had translated it into Yiddish (Vatikai 1994). Later it was also performed by the Green Onion Ensemble (Haim Topol and Avrahamale Mor), and then by Shlomele Bar-Shavit and Nissim Azikry (Bar-Shavit 2012).

In 1977, the skit was adapted by Yossi Banai for the "HaGashash HaHiver trio", for their show "*They Trick Us - Israeli Labor.*" Banai replaced the plumber with the auto mechanic Soya (Shaike Levy) and his assistant Sami (Gavri Banai), and the client, the owner of the vehicle that had been repaired, morphed into the contractor Kalrosho (Israel [Poli] Poliakov). The skit was officially called “The Garage” but was more commonly known as “Kalrosho” (Hagashash Hahiver 1977).² As noted above,

² The skit was included on a recording, Hagashash Hahiver, *Ovdim Aleynu Avodah Ivrit*, pt. 2 (Tel Aviv: Pashnell, 1977), Track 2. It is also on a CD issued in 2008 and on a DVD in the Gashash Hahiver boxed set (2004), Disk. 5, Track 10.

an analysis of the textual metamorphosis of the skit, from Hebrew to Yiddish and back to Hebrew, along with an understanding of the cultural background of the original author, Kishon, and of the adapters, first Dzigan and Schumacher and then Yossi Banai, can shed light on various social and cultural structures in the transition across languages and cultures.

Ephraim Kishon's Satirical Writing

Kishon was a master of describing the pitfalls that trouble the common man in daily life. When he was still living in his native Hungary he was famous as a satirist writing on petit-bourgeois topics such as public transportation, finding one's reading glasses, and how much to pay the plumber. He later "converted" many of the satires to fit the Israeli milieu (London 1993, 164, 230). Kishon dealt with "topics and situations familiar to every Tel Aviv petit-bourgeois" (Shaked 1978, 213). He had the sense to write about his experiences as a new immigrant in real time and about the Israeli scene as he saw it in his own travails as an immigrant; this is what made him unique. Indeed, his writing style and his detailed descriptions of the "little folk" and their daily lives provide an authentic look at life in the young state of Israel, preoccupied with building itself and its institutions, while also deeply engaged with the absorption of new immigrants coming from various cultures and speaking various languages. Kishon claimed that one could not speak about a single Israeli reality or about an Israeli culture, because this culture was being produced by immigrants hailing from many countries, who, by their very presence here, were inventing the Israeli culture. In his words, "no one can tell me 'you're a foreigner,' because anything that was foreign when I arrived in Israel became Israeli together with me" (London 1993, 201).

Kishon, as a foreign humorist from a European culture amid the Middle Eastern reality, saw the latter differently from the long-time residents and had the ability to highlight the strange and absurd elements of certain situations³. For Kishon humor served as a way of coping with the foreign culture he encountered when he came to Israel; his inability to adapt creates the comic gap. For him, humor (as Bergson asserted) plays a sort of social mission as a "fixer." He tries to nudge unacceptable utterances or behaviors in the desired direction (Bergson 1998, 73). Humor also serves him as an instrument for expressing his frustration with the norms of conduct he discovered as a new immigrant, which, without humor, he would have

³ For more on the topic of humorists, see Ziv 1981, 113–138.

had to leave concealed and unsatisfied, while at the same time allowing him to identify with the oppressed (Freud 2007, 159–180). The literary text is a subjective creation, and thorough interpretation requires exposure of the psychological beliefs and perceptions the author adopted when he shaped the power relationships of the protagonists. One should also examine the method of creation and the style of the literary text (incorporating a certain poetic tradition); these are important tools for understanding the relationship between poetic design and the cultural climate within which the author and his work grew. The author shapes the experience of negotiating, describe it from his own point of view. His aim is not only to design an individual case, but to convey a social or philosophical message. The literary dialogue describing a claim for payment is functional: it may represent a universal human condition and serve as a tool for the author to transfer an ex-literary message (Piura 2004, pp. 5). Given these factors, it is fair to assume that Kishon's writing cannot be properly understood without looking at the social, cultural, economic, and political structure of the period in which the texts were written or revised.

Social Criticism of Ephraim Kishon in the Skit "As much as You Like"

In Kishon's skit, the plumber is afraid to state the exact sum he wants to be paid for his repair job, because if the client is willing to pay more the plumber would lose out. Kishon makes fun of the plumber's fear of being a "sucker." The plumber pretends to be shy about asking for money for his work, to the point that the audience identifies with him:

Plumber: What can I do if I am very shy about business matters and not cheeky like others?' (Kishon 1959, 199).

But the client, Mr. Pashutman, voices what Kishon believes is the real reason the plumber won't set a price. It is not because he is bashful when it comes to talking about money, but because he wants to be paid as much as possible and is afraid of setting a price that is less than the client would be willing to pay:

Pashutman: " 'As much as You Like.' A very cunning face. I know this face ..." (Kishon 1959, 197),

Later, after the plumber tries to explain that he is ashamed of taking money, the client retorts:

Pashutman (screaming): "You're shy? You're a killer! Listen, friend, you think that I am as big a fool as you think?" (ibid.)

In the end, Kishon allows the plumber to express his own criticism explicitly:

Pashutman (strangling him with both hands): How much do you get?"

Plumber (strangling, groaning): "However much you give ... for this ... purpose...' (ibid., 200).⁴

Kishon, who had immigrated to Israel in 1949, looks at Israeli culture "from the outside" and identifies the Israeli fear of "being a sucker." He incorporates this criticism of Israeli society into the skit. In those years, the plumber was the prototype of the small tradesman whose services one was forced to use quite often given the ramshackle condition of the sewage system in Israel at the time. On the other hand, he is also seen as a schemer; no layman can understand exactly what he did and what parts he used, because the terms are not in Hebrew but in German, e.g.: *Shpaklin-gumelach*, *Ausreiben*, *Schwimmer*, etc.

Dzigan and Schumacher's Social Criticism

When Dzigan and Schumacher translated the skit into Yiddish and adapted it, they changed the butt of the criticism (Dzigan and Schumacher, [n. d.]).⁵ The criticism in their skit is not directed against the plumber's fear of "being a sucker" and losing money, but against his fear of asking to be paid for his work, because talking about money is uncouth. In this way, the duo turned the skit into a satire on the socialist ethos that prevailed in the country at the time.⁶

Dzigan and Schumacher, who came from families of tailors, where a request for payment was legitimate, and who lived a bourgeois lifestyle, mock the "religion of labor" practiced in Israel, in which the justifiable request to be paid for one's work is

⁴ Kishon revealed his intentions in the description of the plumber at an interview (Vatikai, 1994).

⁵ The duo recorded their skit on their album *Dzigan and Schumacher* (Galton Israel, n.d.), Side 1, band 2. In Yiddish the skit was called "Viefel Ihr Fahrsteit" (As much as you see fit). Note that the duo produced a total of four records with the same name: the skit is also on a CD of Yiddish humor released by the Israel Music company in 2002, track 2; but the end of the skit was cut off there. The unabridged skit is on a record; it was also included on *The Dzigan Show*, broadcast on Israel Television in 1977 and released for sale on a DVD in 2003, performed by Shimon Dzigan and Mosko Alkalai, but without the introduction performed by Dzigan and Schumacher.

⁶ Dzigan and Schumacher came from bourgeois tailor families, held right-wing political views, established an independent theater, made a living on their own, and were opposed to the idea that money is "dirty." For more on this, see Dzigan 1974, 334–337; Anabella 2008. Note that the actress Anabella worked with Dzigan in all his programs after Schumacher's death.

considered vile since work itself is the ideal and money is believed to “sully” it. To emphasize the social criticism, the duo dropped the characters’ names from the skit, thereby stressing the notion that they are not individuals but types. In this skit, Schumacher plays the client and Dzigan plays the plumber.

The duo added an introduction to the skit about skilled craftsmen which mocks Jewish craftsmen. Such criticism, especially at that time, when the skit was played, had been possible only in Yiddish and not in Hebrew. The Hebrew culture at that time sanctified manual work, unlike Yiddish culture which sanctified mental work and learning and did not appreciate manual labor. The introduction begins as follows:

Schumacher: Do you trust⁷ Jewish craftsmen?

Dzigan: Just as much as you do...

Schumacher: I know what you mean⁸ [laughter] (Dzigan and Schumacher, *ibid.*)⁹

In addition, Dzigan and Schumacher’s version of the skit places the emphasis on the fact that people are embarrassed to ask for money for their work. It creates identification with the craftsman who is ashamed to talk about money because it is dirty and does not serve the ethos of uncompensated labor:

Schumacher: Do you want to wring me dry?! Provocateur!

Dzigan: Who wants to wring you dry? You see for yourself, when it comes to money I get embarrassed.

Schumacher: See? Look at this shy child. Poor baby. (drumming his fingers on his lips) Blah blah blah (Dzigan and Schumacher, *ibid.*).

In Kishon’s original skit, Mr. Pashutman’s response to the plumber’s shyness is “You’re shy? You’re a killer! Listen, friend, you think that I am as big a fool as you think?”—meaning that he doesn’t believe that the plumber is embarrassed. By contrast, Dzigan and Schumacher are scornful of the plumber’s behavior and believe that he really is embarrassed. The client thinks the workman is too shy to talk about

⁷ Literally, in Yiddish: "Halt fun", literally: hold from, which means trust and appreciate.

⁸ Literally, in Yiddish: “I’m in the house with you,” which means I understand what you are talking about and identify with you.

⁹ All translations from Yiddish in this article are my own.

money, but makes fun of the notion that someone who works could be embarrassed about asking to be compensated for his efforts and behave like a small child who cannot get to the point. The rightwing and bourgeois Dzigan and Schumacher make fun of the very notion of the economic left, which dominated working-class Israel and held that the demand for fair wages was improper, and thereby satirize the working class itself. As noted, Dzigan and Schumacher eliminated the characters' names and turned them into representatives of classes and power relations in society. Moreover, they added a line about the bourgeois who takes advantage of the working class:

Schumacher: Take a Lira [Israeli pound] and another Lira and that's it.

Dzigan: I've already seen all sorts of pigs who exploit the working class, but a pig like this ...' (ibid.).

This plumber does not represent only himself but all Israeli craftsmen. In this version, it is impossible to think that he is trying to milk the bourgeois for more money or is afraid of setting a price lower than what the client would be willing to pay. Dzigan and Schumacher's plumber cannot set a price for his work because he is too embarrassed to do so. This leads to the criticism they intend—a criticism of the socialist worldview that dominated Israel in those years and saw a request to be paid for one's work as despicable. Note that the economic left was in political power at the time and the government actually placed limits on what Dzigan and Schumacher could do and kept them from settling in Israel, despite their strong desire to do so, by imposing harsh sanctions on performances in Yiddish (Rothman 2007, 35–38). It seems that the very fact that they performed in Yiddish allowed the duo to criticize the government (even if the skit did this in an indirect manner), in contrast to the Mataté Theater, which (as mentioned) closed in 1954 because the public could not absorb the criticism of society and the regime that the troupe presented on stage.

Yossi Banai's Social Criticism

Some twenty years later, Yossi Banai adapted the skit for the comedy trio Hagashash Hahiver. This time the skit underwent a double transformation, both external and internal. From the outside, it is no longer about a plumber but about an auto mechanic, an adaptation that is perfectly natural given the increase in the number of motor vehicles in Israel as compared to the 1950s. The mechanic replaces the plumber as the prototype of a workman whose services no one understands but everyone has to use.

Internally, in terms of the criticism and satire presented, the sketch has changed vastly. It does not make fun of the craftsman who is afraid of asking for too little or of one who is embarrassed to ask for payment for his work. In a role reversal, it now makes fun of the bourgeois who cannot match wits with the craftsman. It is the disdain of the weak for the strong, of the poor workingman for the wealthy contractor, who is identified as Romanian (the stereotypical schemer).

Yossi Banai adds another point that may reflect the socio-political and cultural processes that Israeli society was undergoing in those years and was also expressed in the political reversal (the Mahapach) of 1977, when Likud came to power. During that time, Israel experienced cultural processes that assigned greater value to the Oriental Jewish (Mizrahi) culture at the expense of the Ashkenazi Mapai (the socialist labor party) culture that had dominated the country until then. The political "revolution" was an overt expression of the change in the country's democratic political and socioeconomic structure and reflected the socioeconomic and ethnic divide that split Israel society into two approximately equal and antagonistic blocs after decades in which there had been a clear hegemony of Mapai and its supporters. Yossi Banai added an ethnic dimension to Kishon's text. The Mizrahi makes fun of the Ashkenazi; the powerless Mizrahi laborer makes fun of the wealthy Ashkenazi bourgeois client. It is a Romanian, as a consummate schemer, who falls into the trap set by the supposedly weak Mizrahi. Thus Banai redefines the new power relations in Israeli society and places them on the stage. The confrontation between the Mizrahi laborer and the Ashkenazi contractor-boss reproduces the ethnic division of the labor market, as seen through Banai's own Mizrahi eyes until then. Perhaps he is representing on stage his own aspiration for a change in the power relations among ethnicities, as manifested in the Mahapach. The humor in the Gashash version is what Bakhtin designated "carnavalesque." As in a carnival, carnivalesque humor allows spectators to assume a role they do not have in real life (Bakhtin 1941). Those on the margins of society make fun of characters that the collective sees as representatives of the oppressor class. Hence we can identify with Sami the mechanic, who is portrayed as a fool who doesn't know how to answer questions in a driving theory test, but who also has a strong desire to get ahead in life and open a garage of his own, thereby escaping the cycle of oppression in which he finds himself. As part of the attempt to do so, he has to trick his Ashkenazi rival, who represents the powerful stratum in the country. The Mizrahi tricks the Ashkenazi and even gives him "brake grease" to "calm his

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nerves”—an action that could take place only as part of a carnivalesque humor that releases repressed desires but cannot exist in everyday real life. Laughter serves the weak as therapy for their weakness and the limits imposed by the power of the center.

Frankl asserts that one way to help a person overcome emotional distress is by means of the logotherapeutic technique known as “paradoxical intent,” which stimulates a person to look at his situation from the opposite point of view. A person undergoing such therapy and learning to laugh at himself is on the road to healing his distress (Frankl 1981, 146–149¹⁰). The humor employed by Sami, “who leaves everything and settles accounts with him” but only “drives [Kalrosho the contractor] crazy” is his tool for coping with the oppression of which he is the victim. This skit grounds and ratifies ethnic stereotypes: the wealthy capitalist contractor, a pathetic and senile man who doesn’t remember the joke he told, is Ashkenazi; on the other hand, he is able to force the Mizrahi to listen to the joke. The workers are Mizrahi and serve the Ashkenazi. There is no admission here that they are embarrassed about money, but only, perhaps, that they lack the objective ability to set a price. Thus in an absurd manner their weakness serves as their source of strength against the contractor. The joke ends, of course, as it does in all “bourekas” films, with the victory of the ‘Mizrahi’ over the ‘Ashkenazi’, a victory of the weak over the strong, a victory that cannot be found either in Kishon’s original skit or in Dzigal and Schumacher’s adaptation.

Conclusion

We see that the same joke, when translated from across cultures, is modified to suit the culture of the new audience and the worldview of the author or adapter, and reflects the social, cultural, and political processes that took place in Israeli society during that time, carrying them to the point of absurdity. And therein lies the secret of its power. Kishon wrote a skit about a trait he identified as prominent in Israeli society of the 1950s—the aspiration to make as much as possible and avoid not being a sucker. Dzigal and Schumacher refocused it on a social critique that was close to their heart, criticism of the economic left, which opposed the bourgeoisie and was embarrassed to speak about money as reward for work. Finally, Yossi Banai chose to reflect the changes in Israeli society during the time of the political reversal of 1977, using humor as an instrument for breaking the cycles of social oppression of the

¹⁰ For more on the therapeutic function of humor, see Sover 2009, 82–86.

underclasses, thereby reflecting the new power relations in Israeli society. We see that the use of humor can reveal quite a bit about the society that creates it and about the power relations within that society.

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