

Hey, Take My Ulpan - Please!

- Michael Etkin

Yocheved Miriam Russo

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If you think a funny thing happened on the way to the Promised Land, you'll appreciate the comedy of Rabbi David Kilimnick. "I talk about all the grisly stuff you go through in making aliyah," he says. "People love it. They remember going through it themselves."

Kilimnick, an Orthodox rabbi who grew up in Rochester, N.Y., made aliyah in December 2003 and now lives in Jerusalem. His timing was impeccable: Within a few months, he founded the Off The Wall Comedy troupe, a group of English-speaking Israeli comics who've brought a lot of laughs to English-speakers at a regular weekly gig at the Little Coffee House in Baka, and also to venues all across the country.



"I always knew I was going to do comedy," he says. "So it was just a matter of putting it together."

Israel was ready. The very first Off the Wall Comedy performance drew a crowd of 150, and since then, has played in numerous venues all across Israel, drawing crowds of a half-dozen to several hundred. Kilimnick also hosts a several-week-long Comedy School called "Stand-Up 101."

"It's designed to teach you what makes people laugh," says Kilimnick. "It's for people who want to make their speeches at work bearable, be the funny peep at the table or just come up with a witty response to a bully. Not everyone expects to make a living at stand-up humor."

Kilimnick has a lot of running gags, not all related to aliyah.

"I come from a background of social service," he says, "so much of my focus is on social satire, the things in daily life that are funny. Sometimes, people think I'm crazy - I walk around, writing notes to myself, filling up random files with words scrawled on the back of an old envelope."

One of his most popular routines involves the lack of customer service in Israel. "How can being a customer be an offense?" he asks. "I'll tell you: The reason is, you're going into this guy's store and taking away his showcased item. 'That bread? That's mine!'

"You think you're doing him a favor by giving him money. He thinks he's doing you a favor, by allowing you into his store. This is why when you give a 10-shekel-coin to pay for the milk, you get 116 agorot back. It's not change, it's a punishment. It's a way to keep you from coming back."

Jokes With a Warranty

Warranties are another favorite target: "The word 'warranty' is a derivative of the word 'war,' meaning you are required to fight to make the customer service people - who were kind enough to steal your money - live up to their guarantee."

On Bezek, Israel's phone company: "Bezek just disconnected our phone line because we didn't pay the bill. We never got the bill, but no one ever called to tell us we owed them money. 'What?' I said, 'You're the phone company! You don't have access to a phone?'"

On the post office, which as Israelis know, is rarely open: "I don't think the post office has been open for more than six days in the past two months. What that means is, they delivered the notice that I had a package three days after they returned the package to the sender. But that's understandable, I guess. The post office is closed on all major holidays, but the mail still works because the mail isn't Jewish."

Nor are Jewish holidays spared: "Shavuot? 'Stay up all night and learn.' I learned that rabbis need to develop the ability to talk to people who are asleep. It is part of the ordination curriculum."

Lag B'Omer: "Little kids start collecting anything that burns - wood, matches, cigarettes, the home - up to half-a-year in advance. The truth is, I didn't prepare for the holiday, but I was ready to take down any 5-year-old who got in my way."

"One kid knocked on my door - I had to wrestle him down. 'Give that back! We knock, we don't take the door off the hinges!' Parents in this country have no control. Which brings me to nursery kids smoking. No more cigomats. Everytime I see a kid nursing and buying cigarettes at the same time, I pray it's for mom."

"Is this kind of commentary negative? Saying bad things about Israel? I don't think so. I think it's putting daily life here in perspective. Laughing at the oddities we've all noticed. Communicating with each other, in a unique way."

"Comedy is a necessary religious experience in Israel," he says. "To be able to laugh at ourselves, the way things work, is a blessing. I love Israel."

"I love being here. But anyone who's made aliyah, who's learned to adapt to life here, knows there are stressful moments, times that can be tough."

"To be able to listen to a guy talk about them in a humorous vein, to identify with the funny aspects of it all, is good. It diffuses the tension."

"That's really the essence of comedy, to take something from daily life, an experience the audience knows and understands, and put it in a different light, make people see it in a way they hadn't thought of before."

"To bring laughter, to lighten a tense world for just a moment, to bring a little joy to someone. What could be more fulfilling than that?"