

## HUMOR IN THE LESSONS OF RABANIT YEMIMA MIZRACHI

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**Abstract:** Fifteen years ago, the unusual image of Rabbanit Yemima Mizrachi penetrated the awareness of the religious public. Rabbanit Mizrachi had started giving lessons on the Torah Portion of the Week from a woman's viewpoint, and aroused the curiosity of numerous women who closely followed her innovations that strengthened and empowered the image of the woman. Within a short time, her audience started to grow, and today it encompasses thousands of women, religious and non-religious alike, in and outside Israel. This paper focuses on one of the means of feminine religious rhetoric employed by Rabbanit Mizrachi humor, which, when combined with other rhetorical devices, explains how she carries along her audience of such wide-ranging backgrounds when their only common denominator is that they are women.

**Key words:** Rabbanit Yemima Mizrachi, weekly Torah portion, sisterhood, rhetorical devices, feminism.

### Introduction

Rabbanit Yemima Mizrachi is one of the most famous rabbaniyot in Israel and the U.S., who captivates her audience with her unique personality and ability to present the week's Parasha from a female aspect.<sup>1</sup> Her classes are dedicated only to women and are accompanied by great humor of varied characteristics.<sup>2</sup> The theoretical background discusses religious feminism, religious sermon, the rabbinical image of Rabbanit Yemima, and humor employing rhetorical devices. The main body of the article illustrates the humor

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbanit is a female rabbi; the plural is rabbaniyot. The "Parasha" is a weekly portion of the Bible that Jews read every Shabbat; in a lesson setting, the preacher explains and interprets the text.

<sup>2</sup> See Bat-Zion Yemini (2016).

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of Rabbanit Yamima Mizrahi, and is divided into sections: puns, simile, metaphor exaggeration, allusion, rhyme, slang, insertion of foreign words, and breaking a fixed expression.

### **1. Religious Feminism**

Rivka Lubitch (2000) presents two trends in the feminist-Jewish endeavor today. One is a feminism of adaptation, the aim of which is to compare man with woman in Jewish achievement. The other is a feminism of uniqueness, that strives to highlight the uniqueness of the female public by making the female voice heard on equal terms in the Jewish burden religious, social and cultural.<sup>3</sup> According to both these trends, only if women are involved in learning, interpretation and spiritual activity, will their status improve. From the mid-1990s religious society has undergone a learning revolution, that is described in Rachel Gordin's research (2005: 73). Gordin reviews the changes that started in religious society following the entry of women into the world of *halacha*, and focuses on two main arenas: the role of female rabbinical pleaders in the rabbinical courts, and the conduct of women in synagogues.<sup>4</sup> Religious women underwent and are still undergoing a process of female empowerment, and they are earning a place also as rabbis and preachers. While in the past it was men who taught weekly Torah portion lessons, today the number of women taking on that role is growing along with the demand for their lessons. One of the most influential women in the religious sector today is Rabbanit Yemima Mizrahi, who emerged from anonymity only fifteen years ago. Today her reputation precedes her as a gifted preacher who enralls thousands of women. The purpose of this paper is to present humor in Rabbanit Yemima's sermons, which she uses to guide and empower women in a way that

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<sup>3</sup> Ilan Fuchs (2011: 784) says that Rabbi Shagar adopted a positive attitude to Torah study from a feminine view point, and he quotes: "It is the very absence of a tradition of Torah study for women, and the women's non-subordination to an existing learning tradition, that bestows on them an advantage and the possibility of a Torah breakthrough. The absence of a binding learning tradition will confer vitality on this learning."

<sup>4</sup> Additional changes occurred in other areas, such as theater. See Rina Rotlinger-Rainer (2007).

emphasizes sisterhood. This rhetorical device, together with others, explains how her lessons touch so many women of all ages and from all segments of society.

## 2. The Religious Sermon

One type of religious rhetoric is the sermon preached before certified rabbis who usually serve as heads of *yeshivot* or *kollelim*.<sup>5</sup> In these roles they also advise those who turn to them with questions relating to *halacha*, or even day-to-day living and interpersonal relations. In recent decades, rabbaniyot have also started to preach to women and to advise them. The language of the sermon was researched by Joshua Gitay (1990), and the language and rhetoric of the modern-day sermon by Mazal Yitzhak (2012). The latter characterizes relations between today's preacher and his audience as close, arising from similarity of background. She assumes that this cultural closeness makes the sermon more intimate, lowering the didactic stress it contains. This enables the preacher to develop his aesthetic side. Yitzhak's research (2012) notes five rhetorical devices that characterize the sermon: quotation, story, humor, question, and metaphor. In addition to these five, she points also to the use of two different language registers: the religious-Torah register and the secular register, which includes street talk, slang and grammatical errors.

Rabbanit Yemima Mizrachi's language is rich and high register, but in her lessons she integrates a lower register that fulfills other functions: it brings her closer to her audience, the better to carry them with her; it bestows believability as someone who is familiar with the ways of the secular world, and it entertains (Tzabar 2004: 50).<sup>6</sup> This paper shows how the humor of Rabbanit Yemima Mizrachi uses literary and linguistic rhetorical devices.

## 3. Rabbanit Yemima Mizrachi

Rabbanit Yemima Mizrachi was born in Jerusalem to an Ashkenazi father and Mizrachi mother. As a young woman she identified with the religious-national stream, but later, after marrying a Sephardi man, she became ultra-orthodox (*haredi*). Despite having many

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<sup>5</sup> Young unmarried men study in *yeshivot*; married men study in *kollelim*.

<sup>6</sup> The sermons of Rabbi Amnon Yitzhak were researched also by Malka Muchnik (2004).

children, she devotes much of her time to studying Torah and puts her law degree to good use by working as a rabbinical pleader. In 2001, Rabbanit Yemima started holding weekly Torah portion lessons in her home, for women, focusing on the feminine aspects of the portion. The lessons, which were called “Portion and Woman,” resonated in the religious society, and she began giving public lessons—on the radio and at a venue in Melchett Street in Tel Aviv. She is well-versed in Torah sources, and simplifies them for her listeners while adding a modern interpretation to the feminine one. Furthermore, using the weekly Torah portion, she provides women with tools to better their day-to-day existence and for coping with the various vicissitudes of their lives. For reasons of modesty, Torah portion lessons of women preachers are restricted to audiences of women only, and the lessons of Rabbanit Yemima adhere to this stricture. Entrance to the lessons is free for whoever wishes to attend—religious and non-religious, young and old. The Rabbanit’s lessons are also recorded, and can be viewed on the Ashira network of the women-only internet. Thousands of women do so every week, and can sign up to receive a written edition by email. These women listeners are from the full range of the religious sector but also from outside it, and from all strata—young, old, educated, uneducated. Rabbanit Yemima also travels abroad occasionally to speak to Jewish communities there, and sometimes joins women—religious and secular alike—who travel to Uman<sup>7</sup> on trips organized by Ashira. These women sometimes approach her for personal advice, which she provides free of charge on all channels: face to face, in the media, by email and by telephone.

Unlike women preachers who try to convert the non-religious members of their audiences to a religious way of life,<sup>8</sup> Rabbanit Yemima shows respect for every woman and does not try to proselytize. When women in her audience are not dressed in the modest style of the religious community, she does not comment. Her lessons are spiced with

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<sup>7</sup> Uman is a city in central Ukraine where a revered Jewish holy man is buried. Jews from all over the world visit his grave at Rosh Hashana, asking him to intercede for them.

<sup>8</sup> Asaf Tzabar (2004), Muchnik (2004), Orly Vaserzog-Ravid (2002), Nisim Leon and Aliza Lavie (2014) have all published their research into the language of such “conversion” sermons. Yosef Nedava (1957) and Shimon Jakob Glicksberg (1981) published papers on the theory of oratory and the sermon.

humor, she believes in joyful living and offers practical ways to settle conflicts for the sake of the wellbeing of the woman. She herself always has an elegant and aesthetically pleasing appearance and she encourages women to aspire to the same. Her impressive rhetorical talents reflect womanly insight and boost the stature of her listeners.

#### **4. Humor and Other Rhetorical Devices**

In a media event such as speaking on the weekly Torah portion, what stands out is the argumentative character of the lecture. As with any argumentative text, the speaker must pay attention to how the message is conveyed, and prefer a clear and attractive style rather than a dry and clichéd presentation. Avner Ziv (1981:12) describes the different roles of humor: causing pleasure, touching on matters that are socially taboo, softening aggression, a way to improve society, and the creation of a defense mechanism against fears and anxieties. Humor can be divided into two types: visual and verbal, and the greater one's control of the language, the more one is open to create and enjoy verbal humor (Sover, 2009: 148). Understanding verbal humor depends also on the level of general knowledge and the cognitive abilities of the individual.<sup>9</sup> According to Nadir Tzur (2004: 97), the use of humor is widespread in spoken and written rhetoric because it is a device that appeals simultaneously to emotion and the intellect. This aspect of humor helps the speaker to change the behavior and the opinions of the listener. Humor has many rhetorical advantages: it invites curiosity and removes barriers, it creates intimacy, undermines conventions, simplifies complexities and helps in breaking down emotions. It also changes the self-image, increases attention, keeps the audience alert, and can even make the message more pointed or opaquer.<sup>10</sup> The examples in this paper include cases of self-deprecating humor. Tzur (2004: 98) says that this type of humor in speakers can increase their credibility for the listener, as it attests to their self-confidence. For example, when

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<sup>9</sup> Chiaro (1992), Shalom Tzila Vital-Geiger Perlman (2000), Maya Fruchtman (2005, 2006), Sover (2011) and others have published papers on verbal humor.

<sup>10</sup> See also Ziv (1981: 12). Menachem Blondheim and Limor Shipman (2012) wrote on humor in the service of the sermon, and Chiaro (1992) wrote on the language of jokes. See also Refael Nir and Yitzhak Ro'e (1986).

Rabbanit Yemima complains that her husband cannot get up to attend to the baby at night, she says: “Every time I try the same trick on my husband: ‘Breastfeed him!’ But he can’t” (7.2.11). And when the children are making so much noise it has become unbearable, she looks at her husband and says “Haim, let’s run away...” (9.1.12).

Rabbanit Yemima uses numerous rhetorical devices in her lessons: pictorial language, mainly metaphor and imagery, repeated syntactical structure, humor, rhetorical questions, quotations, self-quotations, mixed register, slang and others. This article focuses only on humor,<sup>11</sup> with examples and explanations of Rabbanit Yemima’s humoristic utterances and the literary and linguistic devices on which that humor rests. These devices include metaphor, simile, puns, rhyme, allusion and exaggeration, as well as the use of slang and low register, breaking a fixed expression, and the integration of foreign words.

## **5. Method and Findings**

The research method is a survey of fifty of Rabbanit Yemima’s lessons on the weekly Torah portion, which were filmed and broadcast on the Ashira site in 2010-2013. Our research randomly selected 12-13 lessons from each year.

Since we are dealing with material to which men are not exposed for reasons of modesty, extreme care was needed in choosing the examples. As a result, utterances that are meant only for women’s ears are not included in the findings. The dates of the various lessons appear in brackets.

## **6. Humoristic Utterances in the Lessons of Rabbanit Yemima**

### **6.1 Puns**

A pun is a linguistic combination in which two or more words having similar pronunciation (or similar root letters) have different or even contradictory meanings. These combinations play with the language and create a measure of confusion in the reader or listener.

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<sup>11</sup> Yitzhak Shlesinger (2000), Zohar Livnat (2011) and Bat-Zion Yemini (2015) and others have written on rhetoric in texts.

1. On a decrease in the value of family owing to the use of electronic communication: “Today there’s no more kugel, only Google” (12.3.12). Kugel is an Ashkenazi Jewish dish that is eaten on Shabbat morning. Rabbanit Yemima exploits the similarity of the sound of the two words to convey a message—kugel symbolizes the value of family, which nowadays is not as united as it was before the Internet age, and interpersonal communication is lacking.

2. Rabbanit Yemima recommends avoiding feelings of revenge; instead, it is better to go shopping and calm down: “Instead of revenge, buy Lancôme” (12.7.10). In Hebrew, the word “linqom” (to avenge) is similar in sound to the name of the cosmetics giant Lancôme.

## **6.2 Simile**

Simile is a widespread linguistic device that compares two things from different fields to illustrate an idea. It usually makes the comparison using “as” or other comparison word (Rivlin 1978: 18).

3. On forefather Jacob who rolled the stone from the mouth of the well: “Where did he suddenly find the strength of Schwarzenegger?” (28.11.11). In asking this question, the Rabbanit is comparing Jacob to a famous film star who attained that status thanks to his physical prowess and sporting achievements.

4. “Perhaps schools are just storage places so we can have some peace and quiet... Couldn’t we raise them in our own homes?” (4.10.10). After the High Holidays, when the children are at home for an extended period, they go back to school and the house is quiet again. In this lighthearted simile, the school assumes the role of storage space.

## **6.3 Metaphor**

Metaphor is a kind of simile that creates identity of meaning between different things without using a comparison word. A particular feature from an item in one field is loaned to an item from another field, giving the new picture an additional meaning beyond the obvious logic of the new verbal combination (Rivlin 1978: 21).

5. On young women who want a partner to order, she recommends: “Compile an Identikit of the suspect. How do you want him to look?” (24.5.10). In this metaphor, the

characteristics of the Identikit are loaned to the list of requirements of young women looking for a partner. The loan is from police work to arranged marriages.

6. “She put on her high heels and started talking like lipstick” (18.2.13). Rabbanit Yemima is describing how external behavior influences internal behavior, and uses as an example of coquettish women whose speech becomes artificial and snobbish.

7. In reply to a woman who complained about her mother-in-law: “Your mother-in-law annoys you? Buy a huge apartment in Alaska” (29.11.11). The apartment in Alaska is a symbol of the unattainable. This sophisticated answer delivers the message—you can’t elude the influence of your mother-in-law, so you will just have to learn how to get along with her.

8. “One person didn’t ‘like’ him on facebook—Mordechai the Jew. Oof, everyone ‘liked’ him, only Mordechai would not bow down, would not make obeisance” (7.2.11). This utterance actualizes the story of the Scroll of Esther, in which Mordechai the Jew does not bow down to Haman. To bow is to show respect to an esteemed or important person. In this day and age, a facebook “like” is a show of respect from one person to another.

9. “I go from one group to another. I see secular women and religious women, mustard, mayonnaise and ketchup women. Such good women... and they are all troubled by the same thing” (14.3.11). With these words, Rabbanit Yemima points to the problems and difficulties of the female gender: finding a husband, having children, making ends meet, etc. These problems, she says, cross sectors: secular, religious, mustard (*ḥardaliyot* = religious women situated on the scala between *haredi* and religious-national). The name *ḥardal* is an acronym from *ḥr* (*haredi*), *dati* (religious) and *leumi* (national), but without the acronym marker (“) it is simply the Hebrew word for mustard (*ḥardal*). Thus, with the last two words in her sentence, mayonnaise and ketchup, the Rabbanit exploits the sound of the first to symbolize sub-sectors in religious society, thereby adding humor and lightening the atmosphere.

#### **6.4 Exaggeration**

Exaggeration is a linguistic picture intended to make an impression and arouse amazement and excitement by overstating a known and manifest truth (Rivlin 1978: 19).



10. Before Rosh Hashana, when a person takes upon herself to adhere more strictly to the commandments: “A 100-year old grandmother who says ‘I’ve decided to observe the no-touching rule’—Who would want to touch you?” (31.8.10). In Jewish religious circles there are those who do not touch before marriage so as to avoid getting too close, which could lead to precluded intimacy. It is known familiarly as the “no-touching rule.” Rabbanit Yemima describes an absurd situation in which a very old woman observes the no-touching rule. In this humorous example, she is conveying the message that before Rosh Hashana, which is the Day of Judgment in Judaism, one should adhere very strictly to the commandments that are difficult to observe, in order to truly repent.

11. On almond trees before the festival of trees (Tu B’Shvat): “The truth is that in recent years they seem to be suffering from attention-deficit disorder. They flower in Tammuz, in Av” (months in the Hebrew calendar) (23.1.12). The almond tree in Israel flowers in January-February, but recently, because of fluctuating weather conditions, it has flowered early. Rabbanit Yemima exaggerates this trend, saying they flower in Tammuz-Av (July-August).

12. “Once upon a time, puberty came when you were between 16 and 18. Now it comes between 4 and 41” (23.5.11). Here too is extreme criticism of reality. Technological developments mean that children are exposed from an early age to unsuitable content, and when they reach puberty the situation is reversed—they continue to be dependent on their parents until middle age.

13. “He’s still in the incubator and he’s already looking at the baby girl next to him. That’s boys for you” (23.1.12). This joke reflects the great interest boys find in the opposite sex, usually from the age of puberty, but here the exaggeration is for its entertainment value.

### **6.5 Allusion**

Allusion is an explicit or implicit verbal reference to a person, place, event or other work (Rivlin 1978: 4).

14. “It seems I’m a reincarnation of Vashti... It can’t be helped, I have to set the world to rights... (24.6.13). Queen Vashti, the wife of King Ahasuerus, the “hero” of the Scroll of Esther, hosted a feast for women at the same time as the king was hosting a feast

for men. Because she refused to obey him when he commanded her to come and show off her beauty to the men, the king ordered her execution. There are those in Judaism who believe in reincarnation, and the task of those who return is to right the wrongs they did in their previous life. According to the Rabbanit, in her previous life she was Vashti, and was reborn to correct her earlier rebellious and disobedient behavior.

15. On the coming of the Messiah: “The Messiah will come to Melchett on his donkey—if he can find parking” (8.7.13). Melchett is the street in Tel Aviv where Rabbanit Yemima gives her lessons. Jews believe that the Messiah will come riding on a white donkey. The Rabbanit, however, says that parking in Tel Aviv is such a problem that even the Messiah will have difficulty finding a spot, despite the multitudes who await Him.

16. On the eve of Remembrance Day: “Tell me, what will resurrection of the dead look like? Are you saying my grandmother will be resurrected with a catheter?” (9.5.11). In Jewish belief, when the Messiah comes the dead will be resurrected. The Rabbanit poses a humorous question that refers back to the time when her late grandmother was fitted with a catheter.

17. “When you have no means of livelihood you shout at your husband ‘Husband (in Hebrew: ba’al), answer us!’” (14.3.11). Ba’al was a Canaanite god believed to bring rain, storms, thunder and lightning. As such, he was seen as the god of life who irrigated the soil. Kings 1 Chapter 18 tells of the prophet Eliahu testing the prophets of Ba’al, who made a sacrifice to their god which was not accepted despite their calls for Ba’al to answer them: “Ba’al anenu” (verse 26). The Rabbanit uses the name “Ba’al” as a homonym for the Hebrew word “ba’al” meaning husband, to show that just like the Canaanite god, the woman’s husband does not answer her cries.

## **6.6 Rhyme**

18. “Here you can see how dad used to be young and hairy” (Hebrew: tza’ir and sa’ir) (8.4.13). In Hebrew there is a difference of only one letter between the two words, which enables the Rabbanit to make a cute rhyme.

19. “After the meetings, when you’re old, you can be open” (13.5.13). In Hebrew, the plural form of “old” is zeqenim and the plural form of “open” is kenim. The message here to young women is not to expose themselves too fully in the early stages of meeting

prospective husbands, because such openness can bring the relationship to an end. Only after the relationship extends and stabilizes, as if reaching old age, should she open up to her spouse and behave with integrity.

### **6.7 Slang**

20. “What nerds today’s mothers are. You’re doing the homework and he’s at the computer. And he says ‘Mum, when you’ve finished bring it here and I’ll check it’” (19.8.13). In calling mothers “nerds,” the Rabbanit is criticizing those mothers who are over-involved in their children’s homework, some to the extent of doing the work for them while they are at the computer. In this mocking description the roles are reversed: instead of the adult checking the child’s work, the child checks the adult’s work.

21. “You need to understand that every zit that Elokim gives you is so that your prayer will cure the zits of others...” (14.2.11). A zit is a pimple, the scourge of adolescence. According to *halacha*, a person must pray also for others, not only for himself. Rabbanit Yemima says that every such pimple grows on the young girl’s face so that her prayers will heal another million pimples of many others.

22. Rabbanit Yemima speaks of her own home with self-deprecating humor: “A house full of talk. As you can see, to this day I can’t shut my mouth” (11.13.13). The Hebrew “lo sotemet,” from the root st“m meaning to block or to plug, when used in the negative, is a slang term for those who never stop talking.

### **6.8 Insertion of foreign words/terms**

23. “Judaism is the only place where you get your degree and then study for it. At the university of life, we learn and then get a B.A., M.A. In Judaism they say B.M—Be a Mother. The job itself will grow you into it” (23.4.12). The Rabbanit exploits the similarity of sound of B.A. and “be em” (= be a mother), combining English and Hebrew. Unlike getting a degree at university, she says, every woman receives prior training for motherhood, but according to Judaism, first “be em” (be a mother), and that will make you a true mother.

24. On the idea that anyone who has money does not get angry because their livelihood is assured: “Sure, honey, he’s got money” (13.10.10). Two rhyming words in English, both of them well known to Hebrew speakers.

25. “Intellect is finished. What’s left is intel—we are fed up with wisdom these days” (4.5.10). Rabbanit Yemima is referring here to the dwindling demand for study of the humanities, which she attributes to the growing interest in the search for gossip information—intel.

26. Later in the same lesson: “The Yiddish word for humanities is Luftgeschäft.” The literal translation of the Yiddish word is “air business”—non-creative work, possibly dishonest.

### **6.9 Breaking a fixed expression**

A fixed expression is a combination of words that appear together and in a certain order, including idioms. When one of the elements of the combination is replaced or their order disrupted, the fixed expression is “broken.” For example, the stock phrase “point of view” is broken when the word “view” is replaced to form “point of vision.”

27. “Then Doron arrived. What a guy! Amazing! What chemistry, what physics, what biology... But—Doron isn’t interested” (9.8.10). The Rabbanit describes a situation where the woman is keen but the man is not interested in marriage. The popular idiom “there was chemistry between them”, meaning they got along well together, is broken by the addition of words from the same field, “physics” and “biology.”

28. The final chapter of the Book of Proverbs (in Hebrew: Mishley) contains a paean to woman, and opens (in verse 10) with the words “Who can find a virtuous woman.” The Hebrew for “virtuous woman” is “ešet ḥayil,” which is a fixed expression in the language. The Rabbanit says: “Who can find Haim’s wife” (16.5.11), changing the fixed expression ešet ḥayil to ešet ḥayim (= life, but also a man’s name), which sounds almost the same. Haim is the name of the Rabbanit’s husband, and she is saying that she is not an ešet ḥayil—another example of her self-deprecating humor.

### **Conclusion**

Rabbanit Yemima Mizrachi gives weekly Torah portion lessons to all-female audiences, and is arousing great interest among women from all walks of life, religious and non-religious, thanks to her message that is addressed to the broadest common denominator of women. She talks about all the issues that occupy every woman, and her principal message is sisterhood. In each weekly portion she illuminates the female aspect, adapting it to our times in a language of equality for all, and employing an impressive range of rhetorical devices. One of these is humor, in which she draws on literary and linguistic devices. This paper provides a number of examples of the Rabbanit's humorous utterances, which shed light on her unique and persuasive style and the secret of her success.

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