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Saturday, October 24, 2009

Better News

[Palestinians are rioting](#), again, throwing stones and firebombs.

Ho, hum.

But did you hear the real news?

Natanya's city elders decided to dress up the city center by painting the main thoroughfare — Herzl Street. Bright purple, no less.

Meet Daniella Ashkenazy.

Born in Washington DC, raised in Silver Spring, Maryland, and living in Israel since 1968, this bilingual Israeli freelance journalist has published commentary, columns and features, serious and light, in Israel's leading print media and newspapers and periodicals abroad. Once upon a time (from 2003 to 2006), she worked for <http://www.mythsandfacts.org/> for 3 1/2 years as their chief researcher and writer — producing two books and countless white papers on "The Conflict".



One thing she learned was the limits of serious advocacy.

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Daniella Ashkenazy, Chelm-on-the-Med

"We all know the media war is a war over imagery," she wrote me. The problem is that the media's imagery of Israel tends to be of unremitting gloom and doom.

Beyond life and death issues, Israel is an outrageously amusing and lively place to live, and it's strange that Jews, famous for their humor from Charlie Chaplin to Seinfeld, haven't a clue about the humorous side of Israeli life.

Take a look at Reuters' "Oddly Enough". Or USA Today's "Offbeat". Or the bestseller The Darwin Reports. They... and a host of other newspapers, wire services, websites and books all cull and collect the silly, the outrageous and even incredibly stupid things people do that "unite humanity". But Israel rates only an occasional mention.

Why?

Any psychologist will tell you – laughter changes brain chemistry with a shower of pleasurable sensations, and this can enhance receptiveness to hear more – even serious argumentation. Why do otherwise unfunny people work so hard to start otherwise serious speeches with a lighthearted joke?

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So, repression of what journalists call "soft news" from Israel could be some kind of sinister conspiracy.

Or, it could simply be that the best man-bite-dog and back-page news is only reported in the Hebrew press.

"The fact is, we Israelis do countless equally unbelievable, innovative, nutty or *chutzpadik* life-embracing things – many that could happen only in Israel," Ashkenazy writes. "I believe every Israel Watcher and any connoisseur of 'news of the weird' deserves to savor these snippets of daily life."

That is why she has launched this piquant news service – [CHELM-ON-THE-MED©](#) – where she retells stories from the Hebrew press. The main source is Israel's largest Hebrew daily – *Yediot Aharonot*.

Chelm is an actual Jewish town in Poland that for generations served as the legendary capital of foolishness. Perhaps the most famous tale is that of one resident who bought a fish on Friday in order to cook it for sabbath. He put the live fish underneath his coat and the fish slapped his face with his tail. Like any good American would, he went to court to press charges – against the fish. The Wise Men of Chelm sentenced the fish to death by drowning.

If you want more folk tales, I heartily recommend *The Fools of Chelm and Their History* by Isaac Bashevis Singer.

But, if you want a completely true court ruling on a divorce settlement requiring the divorcee to pay his former spouse [one pregnant goat a year for the next 35 years](#), then you need to go to

a place at the eastern edge of the Mediterranean.

Of course, it is also the only place you are likely to find a story like this:

Five years ago a group of some 50 passengers who regularly ride the rails from Beersheva to Tel-Aviv organized an ad hoc minyan* to say their morning prayers together, creating a virtual synagogue on wheels in the second coach from the front of the first commuter train of the day.

The only hitch was Mondays and Thursdays: Jewish tradition stipulates that public prayer on these days be accompanied by reading from the Torah. But the group had no Torah scroll.

A Natanya resident who heard of their plight stepped in to donate a full-size Torah scroll he owned, putting the partially-derailed minyan fully on track. When the commuters are at work in the Big Orange on Mondays and Thursdays, the Tel-Aviv train stationmaster holds the Torah scroll for them, until their return.

There is a very serious purpose behind the humor.

Ashkenazy notes that some Israelis may be glad that their foibles do not get more column inches, but that is a misguided approach. It is our foibles which make us human, and for Israel to be any different, Israelis would have to be less than human.

Chelm-on-the-Med is an independent and uncensored news site that will highlight anyone — Right and Left, ultra-secular to ultra-orthodox, Ashkenazi or Mizrachi, veterans and olim, Jew and Arab — when they do nutty or nervy things or only-in-Israel things that reflect the true tone of Israeli public and private life.

"The vignettes on Chelm-on-the-Med© are not just good for a laugh — adding Israel to the family of nations by 'documenting' all the ridiculous things we Israelis do that unite us with the rest of humanity, whose antics are reported regularly in a host of odd news beats." Ashkenazy is convinced that readers will be laughing *with* Israel, not *at* Israel. Moreover, being portrayed as 'life-embracing fools' is a vast improvement over 'starring' as a pariah state.



My biggest complaint is that she only posts twice a month. Ashkenazy is a journalist but she is also the entire staff. Every writer knows how hard it is to get everything just right, and humor is never universal.

But what she allows us to do is very simple: challenge the powerful imagery Palestinians dish up, with other powerful albeit funny images that are just as unforgettable.

We have shared a lot of positive news stories about Israeli technology and "good deeds", and we will likely continue doing so. Yet these stories are too mild to have the same effect as these ridiculous "slice-of-life" stories. Humor can provide perspective in a way that nothing else will.

Take the [January 2009 vignette](#) in Chelm-on-the-Med during the Cast Lead campaign for example:

An IDF infantry unit pushing into Gaza during the Cast Lead campaign expected to engage armed Palestinians but unexpectedly found themselves facing two thoroughly frightened and very famished lions. Luckily they were still in their cages... the remnants of a Rafiah zoo that had been abandoned by the staff. As his unit hunkered down, the brigade commander frantically sought a safe way to gingerly move the lions – and several other 'residents' out of the war zone. Now, the IDF has a host of weird posts – including two stand-up comedians and a fulltime magician, but no one among the brass thought the IDF would need a lion trainer... One idea was to mobilize several Ramat Gan Safari personnel into reserves, on a special mercy assignment.

I have no clue how they dealt with the problem, but when the IDF withdrew, the two lions were safe and sound, unlike a giraffe reported to have died in one of Gaza's smuggling tunnels.

How hard is it to imagine a brigade urgently committing war crimes stopping to worry about protecting the animals in a smuggler's private zoo? Can you imagine the brigade commander's conversation with headquarters? "We'll get back to murdering and pillaging as soon as you get these animals someplace safe. Oh, and one more thing: *send more battle rations, quick!*"

The world fears and hates Israel because it is different, but how hard is it to fear an army where the Jewish mother of an IDF recruit who was deathly afraid of the dark snuck into boot camp and accompanied him on patrol, disappearing at daybreak?

Can I promise you will love every story? Of course not. I wouldn't even try. Humor is not universal enough.

But I've been sniggering for days.

So, what happened to the purple Herzl Street of Natanya? I could not stop laughing long enough to tell you. Click on the image below to visit the site and find out.



Posted by Christopher, 10/24/2009 07:17:00 PM

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