



## THE HUMAN SPIRIT

• By BARBARA SOFER

### Out of sync

Humor, it's said, is a natural resource to be preserved at all costs. My sense of humor is increasingly out of kilter. I recently saw a much-touted US political satire. All around me Americans were laughing riotously at jokes about their president's supposed stupidity. One joke sounded more tired and pointless than the next. Whatever your politics, you have to admit that George W. Bush was clever enough to acquire the most powerful job in the world – twice. There were also supposedly hilarious lines about bombing in Iraq. I wrote off my humor deficiency as something cultural; I was longing for Israeli comic Yatzpan.

But then I come home to Israel and read *Haaretz's* humorous magazine feature about a new American book, and I didn't find that funny either. The how-to guide by Kristina Grish, is *Boy Vey, the Shiksa's Guide to Dating Jewish Men*.

Readers on the Amazon.com Internet site find Grish very funny. But the book's premise – along with the delight in it by a major Israeli newspaper – makes me peevisish. The author's expertise was honed in relationships with Jewish men over six years, and although still unmarried, she's sharing tips for locating and dating members of the Covenant of Abraham and Sarah. Amazon recommends purchasing this book together with *What to Do When You're Dating a Jew: Everything You Need to Know from Matzah Balls to Marriage*.

No, I'm not joshing.

I find intermarriage about as funny as a 30-kilo python named Sarah missing from her cage at Hamat Gader near the Kinneret. I'm clearly out of sync about that, too. According to the often-quoted American Jewish Committee study from 2000, 16 percent of Jews saw marriage between a Jew and gentile as positive while only 12% said "it would pain me if my child married a gentile."

Is this really so? Without casting doubts on the professionalism of the survey, my gut and experience say that Jewish parents are less sanguine about intermarriage than the numbers indicate. Nearly every extended Jewish family has intermarried members so we've adjusted, but not joyfully. Nor can we Israelis afford to be smug. With so many young Israelis traveling abroad, so many immigrants and their children not being Jewish, so many Israelis declining local marriage ceremonies – standing with Israeli children and grandchildren under the *huppa* is no longer a sure thing.

IN THE absence of solutions, I'd like to suggest two relatively easy methods of ameliorating the situation.

From everything I've read, all three streams of Judaism seem to be in rare agreement about the potential of informal Jewish education to win the hearts of Jewish youth. This week, I was at the Kinneret – one eye warily looking for slithering Sarah – to attend the end-of-program ceremony of the six-week summer courses organized by the American Young Judaea and British Federation of Zionist Youth.

Summer programs shrank in the wake of the Palestinian violence which began in 2000 as parents sent their children elsewhere. But they're back and programming needs to be drastically expanded and to include more Israeli kids as well. The grand finale program had a serious element: the kids committed to advocacy for Israeli soldiers missing in action. But the rest was clean fun: sports, fireworks and a party.

The 867 tanned, fit, ebullient Jewish teens from the United States and Britain and their 92 counselors were having such a good time dancing to Israeli music with the lights of Tiberias in the background that I felt sorry for their peers left behind in the Diaspora. Socializing among Jews and seeing themselves as part of Jewish peoplehood were

#### *I'm not laughing at jokes about intermarriage*

new and positive experiences for many of the kids. A summer program is how I started my love affair with Israel, so I know how life-transforming such a trip can be.

A second and unrelated idea came my way from an American reader who strongly recommends the Internet dating site Frumster.com. The matchmaking service focuses mostly on observant Jews but is open to all Jews and claims 222 weddings in the last three years.

For interest, I followed up one of the stories. Daniel is an Israeli mathematical physicist who moved to Japan to study. He coped easily with the country's culture and with the elliptic islands of mathematical physics. But what about a bride? Around the time Daniel moved to Japan, a Japanese woman named Yuuko moved to Jerusalem, where she converted to Judaism. With her unusual background, finding a match wasn't easy. On a whim, she put "Japan," in the Frumster search engine and Daniel's name popped up. They met on her trip home to visit family and had long conversations about Judaism in two languages, Hebrew and Japanese. (Okay – were they a match or not?)

Last January they held what they think was the first Orthodox wedding in Japan since World War II. What were Daniel's chances of finding an observant Jewish bride in Japan? "Not one in a million," says mathematician Daniel. "Actually, one in 126 million."

Now, that's the kind of funny story I like.