Thoughts on *Shavuot* 2024

by Rabbi Ilan Emanuel,
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One of my favorite Talmudic stories tells of Rabbi Baroka of Huza who enjoyed visiting the local marketplace. One day he bumped into the prophet Elijah there (as you do!) and the rabbi asked, "Is there anyone here who will have a share in the world to come?" Elijah started to say no, but then two people entered the marketplace and Elijah answered, "Those two will have a share in the world to come!" Curious, Rabbi Baroka asked the two, "What is your occupation?" "We are jesters," they replied. "When we see a person who is sad, we cheer them up. And, when we see two people quarreling, we try to make peace between them."

Jewish history is full of difficult and challenging times, dark realities and relentless enemies. Yet despite it all, Jews and Judaism have always been uniquely focused on hope. A significant element of that has been a focus on humor and laughter. When Abraham and Sarah are told they will have a child in their senior years after so long trying, Sarah cannot help but laugh. The Talmud tells us that the great teacher Rabba began his classes with a series of jokes to make his teaching more effective and that even God dedicates an hour a day to laughter. And in modern times the joke is that a book on Jewish sports heroes would be a pamphlet, but a similar tract on Jewish humorists would fill volumes.

Perhaps this focus on humor is not despite the dark times so many Jews have experienced, today and in the past, but because of them. Ecclesiastes tells us that there is a time to weep and a time to laugh and perhaps we laugh because otherwise we would cry, and laughter brings hope to difficult days. By making fun of the arrogant and self-important, we hope not to take them or ourselves too seriously. By laughing at the misfortunes and absurdities of life, we hope to lessen their sting. As a people so often put upon by the bullies of history, we hope, like the rabbi in *Fiddler on the Roof* when asked if there was a proper blessing for the tsar, that our humor can keep the tsar and other enemies "far away from us!"

A joke tells of a group of elderly retired people who gathered each morning at a café in Tel Aviv, sitting for hours discussing all the troubles of the world. Given the state of the world, the tone of their discussions was usually quite gloomy. One day Moshe startled the others by saying: "You know what? I'm an optimist!" The others were shocked but then one of them asked: "Wait a minute! If you're an optimist, why do you always look so worried?" Moshe responded: "You think it's easy being an optimist?"

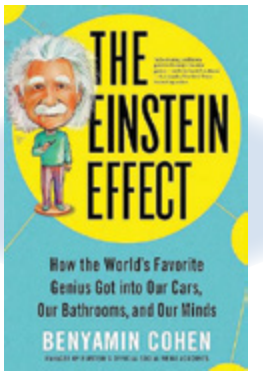
It's not easy, but we are called to be optimists, to be jesters like those in the market in the Talmudic story, who bring joy and laughter to others and ourselves even in the face of a terrible world. In laughter we seek to maintain the hope we need, as our ancestors did in dark times of their own, to bring light and laughter into the world now and to work towards a future in which all can laugh and find peace together.

» BOOK REVIEW

The Einstein Effect: How the World's Favorite Genius Got into Our Cars, Our Bathrooms, and Our Minds by Benyamin Cohen

Reviewed by Michael Gordon, Ph.D.

If you search for Albert Einstein on Facebook, you'll be one of more than 20 million devoted souls who follow him, knowing full well that he died in 1955. From beyond the grave, this most celebrated of all scientists will post photos, articles about his work, interviews of those he's inspired, responses to questions and more – all thanks to his modern-day avatar and whisperer, Benyamin Cohen.



This 40-something Jewish writer who lives in the hills of West Virginia spends much of his days being Einstein, without the genius part (he describes himself as "at best, a likable idiot"). Under the auspices of the Einstein Archives at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, an institution Einstein co-founded, Cohen manages the legendary genius's social media pages. He also wrote a funny and eye-opening book entitled, *The Einstein Effect: How the World's Favorite Genius Got into Our Cars, Our Bathrooms, and Our Minds.*

It is fair to wonder whether the world needs yet another book on Einstein. Professor Google will tell you that there at least 2000 books on the topic, and more are released each year.

Cohen's rationale for writing this book seems twofold: 1) he has a unique insight into Einstein's hold on the public imagination and scientific community given his ever-increasing popularity within social media; and 2) his access to the archives provides endless opportunities for offering insights into Einstein's genius as well as his ongoing influence on large swaths of modern life. In my opinion, the author succeeds in making this account of Time Magazine's "Person of the Century" a worthy addition to the burgeoning list of Einstein-related books.

Although I have long given up on retaining even a glancing understanding of Einstein's theories, Cohen has helped me appreciate how they continue to undergird new discoveries and inventions to this day. GPS, photoelectric cells, nuclear power, space travel and even paper towels were all based on Einstein's theories. They keep exerting impact on research into black holes, time travel, quantum theory and other domains of theoretical physics.

Cohen details Einstein's profound influence on culture, from movies, television shows, art and even toys (I now have a high-end Einstein bobble-head doll in my office), to initiatives in philosophy, pacifism, civil rights, Zionism and humanitarianism. I also learned what I should have already known – that Einstein was the co-founder of the International Relief Council, the premier relief organization still at work today. Unlike so many other geniuses, he aimed to use his celebrity for good, not for further self-promotion.

What I have always most appreciated about Einstein's legacy is his well-documented humility. This most famous and admired scientist in history seemed never to have taken himself seriously. He constantly made fun of himself while expressing amazement that he should be so celebrated. From his standpoint, he achieved success not by being the smartest, but by being imaginative and inquisitive. Cohen does an admirable job of illustrating how being down to earth can, among other things, promote a novel understanding of the universe.

In his writing, Cohen strives to emulate what he seems most to admire about Einstein – his boundless curiosity, playfulness and humanity. The author takes you on a kind of adventure as he tries to experience what it would be like to be Einstein (from walking around barefoot to letting his hair grow wildly). He also interviews people who have an Einstein connection – physicists searching for alien life, theorists working on time travel, directors of some of the many films that have an Einsteinian vibe and so on. It's a delightful journey.

The only issue I have with Cohen's work is that he doesn't expend much effort exploring some of the less admirable aspects of Einstein's life. For example, he was neither a faithful husband nor an attentive father, even though he had a reputation for being unusually accessible and supportive to those outside his family. He likely preferred to connect at the level of ideas, not emotions. If you're an Einstein, I suppose it's an understandable preference.