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Bring out the Laughter Brigade

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We've tried everything - from serious advocacy to provocative pictures of sexy sabras in bikinis. With every newspaper on the face of the earth reporting Israel's bedlam-bordering-on-anarchy two-Jews-three-opinions political culture, it's rather amazing, but a third of the Germans, Spanish and English and 20 percent of Americans recently polled believe Israel is headed by a dictator. This is only one finding in a survey conducted by Midgam in collaboration with El-Al, published in the Hebrew daily *Yediot Aharonot*.

We've featured Israel's free-wheeling openly-gay community as a come-on for tourists with alternative lifestyles, but 20.6 percent of the Spanish and 15 percent of the English and the Germans are sure that stoning - like in the Bible - is part of the Israeli judicial system.

All things considered, maybe it's a blessing in disguise that 10 percent of all Americans have never heard of Israel. Twenty-nine percent of the Germans who have, think Arabs can't vote.

The one ploy we Jews have yet to try is our oldest and most effective weapon. Humor.

Yes, it's time to crack out the humor, bring on the clowns - and they come in a host of packages: Silly politicians and Kafka-like ordinances, two-bit crooks and weird court cases and people with harebrained schemes.

Israel is a militaristic country? Let's fight back by introducing folks to the IDF recruit who was afraid of the dark, whose Jewish mother snuck into boot camp and accompanied him on patrol, disappearing at daybreak. And the reserve combat unit that found itself wrestling with feeding two famished Palestinian lions during the Cast Lead campaign.

Wanna kill the "stoning image" and leave an indelible impression? Scholarly descriptions of the Israeli court system won't make a dent. Tell the average Tom, Dick or Helmut about the minister of justice throwing the book at overly-judicious judges in the lower courts who've gotten into the bad habit of writing long-winded decisions "as if everyone was on the Supreme Court." They'll never forget it.

Israel is a gloomy and dangerous place? That's what focus groups find among Jewish kids. The best antidote for such adolescents is a hefty dose of anecdotes about... Israeli adolescents.

Take your pick: impudent young entrepreneurs who one August night "took over" an empty office building parking garage in the heart of Tel Aviv, set up an open-air disco that attracted thousands of youngsters, then vanished into the heat of the night with the take. Or, the

partially-unidentified "benchmarkers" who attached little engraved metal plaques to benches along Tel Aviv's Rothschild Boulevard - declaring "Amnon's Bench" or "Hilah's and El'ad's Bench," leaving city officials scratching their heads at this strange graffiti. And those are just the appetizers.

Want to balance the picture of Israel being "a country filled with religious fanatics"? This glum plum was discovered by the focus group people, this time studying adults. Share the news about an Orthodox rabbi from Caesaria who donned a pair of rollerblades to make Shabbat *minyanim* at two different synagogues at opposites ends of town.

These are all genuine news items published in reputable mainstream Hebrew papers. They just never made the *Washington Post*. Most didn't even make the *Jerusalem Post*. Nor Chuck Shepherd's syndicated column *News of the Weird* carried by 250 papers across the globe... because almost all these stories which we journalists label "soft news" are safely hidden in the back pages of the Hebrew press.

Take the stories about an enterprising security guard who chose to hold up the very bank he was hired to protect against suicide bombers, or the court ruling on a divorce settlement requiring the man to pay his former spouse one pregnant goat a year for the next 35 years - raising serious questions over "who got whose goat"?

The above events occurred in the middle of the 2000-2005 Terror War - two out of literally thousands of quirky news clippings I have from that time.

Clearly, something is very wrong with the way Israel is being perceived even by our most ardent supporters, if an American-Jewish woman felt compelled to go on three solidarity missions in 2002 saying "it was like visiting a relative in the hospital."

Furthermore, anecdotes like these can be skillfully used by hasbara activists, particularly on campus and in schools - lacing their argumentation with humor to defuse tension and break down stereotypes, or burying hecklers in a sea of laughter with a few well-placed shots of humor. This kind of input about Israel has the power to unsuspectingly undermine the preconceptions of even the most dedicated Israel-basher.

With all the funny Jews out there - some say 80 percent of all comedians are Jewish - it's time we mobilized cadres of talk show scriptwriters, standup comedians and humor columnists and satirists - even off-Broadway playwrights who will begin using this kind of material in their professional lives.

There is an overabundance of wacky news from Israel that can make the cut on its own merits just waiting to be spoofed and savored, that happens to paint Israel as the comical, familial, quirky and, at times, unbelievable place it really is.

No one's preconceptions - friend or foe - will survive intact.

The writer is a seasoned bilingual Israeli journalist who writes features for The Jerusalem Post and once wrote serious and humorous copy for a host of other print media (Israel Scene, Jerusalem Dateline, Davar, Telegraph, Haolam Hazeh) who are 'dead' due to no fault of her own. She authors Chelm-on-the-Med© Online (www.chelm-on-the-med.com) which serves as an open source for incredible snippets of daily life in Israel culled from the Hebrew press.