Chapter 5. Finding Bearings in a Tangled Web: Representation of the Arab-Israeli Conflict in the Humor of Russian-Speaking Israelis

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Introduction

As an opening to this chapter I'd like to give an excerpt from a comic list circulating on *Ru.net*, the Russian-language section of the Internet[1]:

A true Israeli is he who

- never misses a news program
- considers the word "politics" to be an insult
- freezes each time he hears on the radio "*ZAHAL*[2] press attaché reports…"
- likes to tell a story of a miracle: once a terrorist attack occurred just three meters away from him or only three minutes after he passed the site
- is a taxi driver if he knows how to solve the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Russian-language Israeli forum *Besedka,* posted on 31 May, 2011[3] (http://besedka.co.il/index.php?showtopic=9156&pid=1002739&st=1560&#entry1002739), last accessed on 25 Nov 2012)

For many people in the world Israel of today is primarily associated with the Arab-Israeli conflict. This is also the hottest theme of the formal and informal discourse in the country, and there is no national consensus as to how the conflict can be resolved. When people need to relieve tension and pain, give vent to anger and reinforce the bounda-

ries between in- and out-group members, they often resort to humor and ridicule. Confrontation with the neighbours is a pervasive theme of Israeli humor and satire. It is well known that in order to fully appreciate the meaning and significance of political humor one has to be familiar with the relevant political culture, the nature of disagreements and conflicts that are derided or condemned, and the goals of competing and struggling political forces (Mulkay 1988: 201). In many cases only the second- or third-generation immigrants become actively involved in political life of the receiving society and creative activities that reflect their group's shared attitudes and values. This might be the reason why immigrants' contribution is seldom considered in studies of political humor. To-date immigrants' humor has been primarily researched as a coping strategy which allows people to make light of the hardships of border crossing, loss of home and difficulties of integration into a host society (Dégh 1972; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1983; Salamon 2010; Shifman and Katz 2005; Zilberg 1995). It has also been investigated as a mechanism boosting in-group solidarity and mobilizing resistance against marginalization that confronts newcomers (Apte 1985: 134–135; Ben-Amos 1973; Vaid 2006).

Russian-Israeli humor covers a variety of political issues ranging from party politics and the influence of the religious sector on various aspects of domestic affairs to interethnic clashes and corruption scandals in the upper echelons of power. Yet, it is the conflict with Arab neighbors that has proven to be its most salient and stable theme. Moreover, since attitudes to this conflict may affect a person's choice of a social circle and cause alienation from friends and families, making sense of it became an important part of the process of renegotiating immigrants' identities and shaping group allegiances.

Channels of Humor Dissemination

Channels of humor dissemination in the Russian-speaking community are varied and have evolved gradually. Oral dissemination, i.e., exchange of jokes, comic rhymes and toasts[4] is an indispensable part of all informal gatherings and parties and family festivities. The second, and probably, the most important channel for the first 10 years after the beginning of the big immigration wave from the USSR in 1989, was the Russian-language mass media. In Israel, the Russian-language press had emerged long before the 1990s, but the 1990s saw its unprecedented

growth. At the turn of the millennium, Russian-speaking Israelis had a choice of 100 newspapers and magazines, programs of the state-sponsored radio station *REKA* (broadcasting 10–16 hours per day), private radio stations, the Russian-language TV channel *Israel plus*, and Internet news portals (Caspi et al. 2002; Elias 2006; Epstein 2006: 241–250). Humor supplements or joke columns appeared in virtually every newspaper. The Russian-language state-owned TV channel *Israel plus* popularizes immigrants' humor by inviting comedians and writers who were famous still before emigration and continue publishing after moving to Israel. With the increased use of *Ru.net* the popularity of conventional press dropped and many readers chose Russian-speaking Internet portals favoring them for speedy update on the current events and interactivity. Many of the big portals, such as www.souz.co.il, www.israelinfo.ru, www.zahav.ru have forums and chat rooms, and humor threads are found on all of them, some lasting for years and numbering hundreds of posts and thousands of viewings[5]. They feature most popular genres of contemporary Russian humor: jokes (*anekdoty*), personal experience jokes (*baiki*), anti-proverbs, comic rhymes, comic lists, cartoons, manipulated images and multimedia ensembles. Finally, comic and satirical texts dealing with immigrant experiences are created for the student cabaret *KVN* (the Club of the Merry and Resourceful) which runs on the competitive basis in many enclaves of the Russophone world, including Israel. The most popular pieces from *KVN* contests are reproduced orally and in the media. The Open League of *KVN* in Israel has its own web site on which it records history of the cabaret in Israel, posts the schedules of upcoming "games", excerpts of the skits performed in past seasons, and reviews and photo-galleries of the performances (see http://kvnisrael.co.il/, last accessed on 15 Dec 2012). Russian-speaking comedians and writers give concerts, publish their texts in Israel, the FSU and in Russian enclaves of Europe and North America. They post their works in Russian electronic libraries, such as *Zagranitsa* (Russian for "abroad"), the repository devoted to creative writing about life outside Russia (http://world.lib.ru/, last accessed on 15 Dec 2012). The favorites among all these texts and multimedia ensembles are copied and re-posted on humor hubs, in forums and blogs and circulate as viral e-mail messages. Gradually they lose signature and become part of contemporary folklore. Importantly, thanks to the Internet, émigré humor has become transnational and circulates among Russophones residing in various countries of the world (Yelenevskaya 2009b: 268–269).

Demand for Political Humor

In the last three decades, communication analysts, popular culture and humor researchers have often noted the blurring of boundaries between conventional political discourse and entertainment (see e.g., Baym 2005; Billig 2005; Delli Carpini & Williams 2001; Jones 2005). Politicians try to boost their image by showing off their sense of humor when they meet their electorate or deliver speeches. Moreover, they use jokes as a strategy aiming to embarrass their opponents in the eyes of other politicians (see Billig's analysis of Berlousconi's joking in the European Parliament, 2005: 177–184). They joke to avoid discussion of pressing issues or make light of their own deficiencies (see Lewis about Reagan's and Bush Junior's humor, 2006: 169–171). Moreover, humor serves as a powerful instrument of pre-election campaigns (see Alekseevskii's analysis of Ziuganov's jokes, 2010). TV and Internet have made major contributions to the overlapping of politics and entertainment. Late-night TV shows in which anchorpersons and their guests crack jokes about current political events, puppet shows parodying national politicians and enacting scenarios which satirize political affairs, ironic and derisive depiction and interpretation of everything political on the web and in YouTube – these are just a few examples of erosion of distinction between discourses aimed to inform and those meant to entertain citizens. Among the reasons for the breakdown of this distinction researchers mention the proliferation of information technologies which have dramatically increased the amount and range of information readily available, the speed at which it becomes available, and the opportunities for interactive mass communication (Delli Carpini & Williams 2001: 166). Another reason has been formulated by Fiske, who points out that news reporting has a social responsibility. It is required to disseminate knowledge that people may not want to acquire and may find little pleasure or relevance in having (2011: 121). But even if citizens are interested or concerned, conventional information formats do not have equal appeal to various social and age groups, and many seem to be more responsive to the so called "soft news" or "infotainment" (Baym 2005; Jones 2006; van Zoonen 2005).

Infotainment does not only make its content available to wider audiences than the authoritative news reporting and analysis; its advantage is in creating a wider range of relevancies requiring connections between the text and the social experience of the audiences

(Fiske 2011: 152). In the case of Russian-speaking Israelis experience acquired in the country of origin taught ex-Soviets to distrust the state and the state-owned media viewed as an instrument of suppressing and manipulating the individual (see chapter 2 pp. 88–95). Moreover, they were highly skeptical about politicians' ability and desire to seek the good of the population. Back in the "old country" open expression of discontent with state policies was associated with dangers to well-being and to life itself. Even in the post-Stalin period people avoided expressing their opinion in public discussion and would open up only in the company of close and trusted friends and family. And it is in this environment that the most favorite genre of urban folk culture, political joke, flourished. Not a weapon capable of changing the regime, joke exchange was a barometer of attitudes to the system, communication charged with meaning and one of the ways to liberate the self from the cruelty and stupidity of the system (Benton 1988; Davies 2011; Krikmann 2009; Sheygal-Placzek 2009.)

Although in the first stage of adaptation to the new environment immigrants are known to be preoccupied with integration problems, ex-Soviets who immigrated to Israel in the 1990s became involved in political life very soon after arrival. On the one hand, major Israeli parties were interested in attracting the new electorate and courted it by trying to involve prominent members of the community, including journalists, in election campaigns; on the other hand the newcomers themselves created several political parties which pledged to advance their co-ethnics' interests and needs. But despite these new opportunities, immigrants of the 1990s did not give up the familiar habit of judging politics and politicians, sorting out relations with various *others* seen as rivals or enemies, and critically evaluating the status of their in-group with the help of humor and satire. In many cases parties and politicians were evaluated through the prism of their attitudes to the Arab-Israeli conflict. But while in the Soviet Union it was impossible to criticize the national policies or politicians in the media, in Israel conventional and electronic press, and to a smaller extent radio and TV, became platforms for political humor and satire.

The Arab-Israeli conflict was a distinct theme of the Soviet jokelore that emerged after Israel's victory in the Six-Day War in 1967. Although Soviet authorities responded to it with an anti-Israeli campaign and intensified covert discrimination against Jews, the jokes of the period reflected mobilization of the group's ethnic pride. As Draitser

convincingly showed in his book about ethnic humor in the USSR, these jokes reinforced the group's boundaries, boosted its morale and rejuvenated the theme of emigration (Draitser 1998: 132–152). After Israel's military success, numerous jokes about victorious Israelis circulated in the USSR. While the official propaganda invariably presented Israelis as aggressors, jokes portrayed them as skillful warriors capable of defeating the enemy thanks to wit and ingenuity. They outsmarted the outnumbering but "naïve" and "stupid" Arabs, achieving victory by swift action. This complimentary portrayal was in sharp contrast with the Diaspora image of a timid and humiliated Jew, and even the pervasive epithet the "Israeli aggressor" was perceived as a triumph over the prejudiced Soviet lore which presented Jews as cowards who had evaded conscription and spent World War II in the rear. The common slur of the war period was that Jews were fighting in Tashkent (see Draitser 1994: 259; Yelenevskaya 2009a; Fialkova in this book: 203). Besides showing pride in the accomplishments of Israelis, many of the jokes about the Arab-Israeli conflict exposed Soviet policies in the Middle East. Soviet help to Arabs emerged as clumsy and ambivalent, causing more harm than good (see jokes with these motifs in Shturman & Tiktin, 1987: 528–538).

Although interethnic intolerance and humor targeting another group are not likely to emerge if the two groups have no extensive cultural contact (Apte 1985: 133), ex-Soviet Jews had formed negative stereotypes of Arabs long before meeting them in everyday life. Upon arrival in Israel, this negative attitude was reinforced by the Gulf War and frequent terrorist attacks that plagued Israel during both *Intifadas*[6]. The percentage of FSU immigrants among the victims of terrorism is relatively high because many of them live in settlements where the probability of terrorist attacks is higher than in Israel proper and secondly, because due to a low socio-economic status many have to use public transport, which is a factor of increased risk (Epstein *et al.* 2004). In addition, immigrants found that they had to compete with Israeli Arabs for resources, primarily, for jobs and social benefits. As a result, without making a distinction between Palestinians living beyond the Green Line and Arab citizens of Israel, FSU immigrants came to perceive Arabs as the ultimate *other* (Yelenevskaya & Fialkova 2004).

The Role of Precedent Texts in the Framing of the Conflict

The early and mid-1990s was the period of shaping collective attitudes to the conflict based on the new "insider" knowledge and experience. When immigrants familiarize themselves with realities of the host society in order to interpret them and work out individual and shared attitudes they rely on the experience acquired in the country of origin and on the knowledge of "precedent texts". This term was introduced by the Russian sociolinguist Yu. Karaulov who defined it as "texts that are significant for an individual's cognition and emotions and have a supra-personal nature; i.e., they are well known to the linguo-cultural group the individual belongs to, including his/her predecessors and contemporaries. These texts are systematically reproduced or alluded to in the discourse of the individual" (Karaulov 1986: 215). The folklorist K. Bogdanov adds that precedent texts serve as the basis of the collective discourse, since the knowledge of these texts is a criterion of social identification and a prerequisite for mutual understanding in the establishment of an ideological position (Bogdanov http://www.ruthenia.ru/folklore/bogdanov1.htm, last accessed on 3 March 2011). Precedent texts are a rich reservoir of symbols that are widely used by members of a lingua-cultural group, in particular in creative discourse. And since humor is a type of creative discourse based on the carnivalesque distortion of concepts and norms (Karasik 2007: 358), allusions to Russian and Soviet history, literature and folklore were among the main techniques of immigrants' humor of the 1990s, including texts and images devoted to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Allusions create additional associations and project the meanings of the source text on the target text.[7] Their rhetorical power depends on the familiarity of the source by the addressees, so the most effective of them make use of precedent texts. Let me illustrate it with examples.

Already in the early 1990s when Israeli government under Itzhak Rabin started peace talks with Palestinians, which eventually led to Oslo Accords, new immigrants from the FSU showed skepticism as to the success of peaceful initiatives. This attitude was expressed in the pejorative name invented for the Oslo Accords between Israel and Palestinians. Using the interlingual paronymy Oslo – *osiol* (donkey) Russian speakers came to refer to it as *oslinyi mir* (assy peace).

In the period of heated discussions about the wisdom of Oslo Accords immigrants coined an anti-proverb quoted in verses and frequently used in oral communication still today.

> *Protiv shaloma net priema* ('No trick works against peace')

This is a paraphrase of the Russian anti-proverb coined in the Soviet times:

> *Protiv loma net priema* ('No trick works against a crow-bar', equivalent to the English saying 'There is no arguing with a large fist').

The difference between the source and the target texts is minimal: *loma – shaloma* (crow-bar – peace), which intensifies the semantic difference between the paronyms and turns the notion of 'peace' into a menace imposed on the people by coercion.

Another allusion, frequently coming up in the immigrants' discourse about Israeli politics, is based on the source text that dates back to the late 1980s. One of the favorite sayings of M. Gorbachev, connoting the irreversible changes in Soviet society triggered by *perestroika* was "The process has set off" (in the original *Protsess poshel*). Like many statements of the Soviet and post-Soviet leaders, it became a humorous cliché[8] implying with a tinge of irony that some phenomenon is out of control (Mokienko & Nikitina 2001: 487). Russian-speaking journalists in Israel are well aware of the semiotic potential of this saying and it frequently appears in ironic headlines: "Where did the process go?" (Dvoretskii 2007 about state budget problems); "Has the process set off? Or do they still mill the wind in meetings?" (an online article about ineffective work of a utility company http://www.grand-prc.ru/jomsocial/zapisi/2011-03-02-00-43-35.html, posted on 1 March 2011, last accessed on 29 Dec 2012). Humorists also make use of this saying. One example is from a Russian-Israeli humor weekly *Beseder? Dlia tekh komu esche smeshno*[9] (O.k.? For those who are still in the mood to laugh). In response to unrest on the border with Lebanon in the North of Israel, it published a mock analysis of the current affairs deriding alleged confusion among the officers, the government's loss of control over the situation and the stalling of the peace process. The text was headlined *Kuda poidet protsess – bol'shoi sekret* (Where the process will go is a big secret) (*Beseder?* 30 Jul 1993: 1). Besides alluding to Gorbachev's saying, this short sentence brings to memory

Winnie-the-Pooh's song from a Soviet cartoon by Feodor Khitruk. The cartoon adaptation of A. Milne's book "The World of Winnie-the-Pooh" was extremely popular in the Soviet Union. Winnie became the protagonist of jokes, and Winnie's songs translated by Boris Zahoder were known by heart by children and adults. Linking political irony and a lighthearted song of a funny awkward bear downgrades the peace process to children's play where nobody is responsible for the results.

Ironic allusions to Gorbachev's saying can be found in blogs and discussion forums when the Arab-Israeli conflict is discussed. Whether quoted or paraphrased it usually appears in the strong positions of the text, primarily in the titles of posts. One example dates back to the political crisis that occurred in Israel when under the Prime Minister Ariel Sharon the government decided to dismantle several settlements beyond the Green Line. One of the articles in a popular discussion forum was entitled: "The Process has set off. How will it all end?" The general feeling of the participants was that the damage done by this step was irreversible (http://besedka.co.il/index.php?showtopic=1548&st=20, posted on 28 Jun 2004, last accessed on 29 Dec 2012). Another example is very recent. The Israeli blogger Lilofeia used Gorbachev's saying without any innovations in her report about the beginning of the military operation Pillar of Defense in Gaza in November 2012. The post addressed readers inside and outside Israel. It summarized information of press releases interspersing it with emotional statements, slang expressions and idioms demonstrating the author's ironic attitude to Palestinians and whole-hearted support of the operation. Unlike the previous examples which paraphrased or changed the modality of the original saying, the blogger's post did not add any innovations relying on the readers' knowledge of the source text.

The value of political humor is in its immediate response to events. Sheygal-Placzek believes that political humor can be regarded as secondary texts in relation to the primary political text which it interprets and evaluates. Conceptual and information structure of a secondary text is more complex than of a primary one (Sheygal-Placzek 2009: 236). This can be further complicated by the combination of text and image. Cartoons commenting on peace initiatives of the 1990s serve to illustrate this view.

Figure 14. *A. Dubovskii", "Peace talks resumed", published in Beseder?, 27 Nov 1992, p. 1.*

This cartoon appeared in 1993 in response to one of the numerous attempts to resume peace talks, which are conceptualized not as a give-and-take process but as an act of violence. The winning "partner of the negotiations" is wearing a uniform of the Red Army soldier, but instead of the red star, he carries the Jewish symbol, the star of David, on his helmet. The defeated Arab partner is dressed in civilian clothes, and the juxtaposition of a military uniform and the robe of a Muslim suggests the opposition of strength and weakness. The militancy of the Russian-Israeli also stems from his words "All the power to the *olim*" (Russian for "immigrants"). This is a paraphrase of the Bolshevik slogan "All the power to the Soviets" – the slogan that was quoted and alluded to throughout the Soviet era. Like in many other cartoons and humorous texts, the view of the conflict comes together with furthering the group's main agenda of securing a better position vis-a-vis the host society. In serious discourse and in humor ex-Soviets promote the idea that the experience acquired in the Soviet Union makes them more sober in evaluating the political situation in Israel and more firm in defending the country's interests.

Figure 15. *A. Daniel, "He is so experienced!" published in Beseder?, 16 Jul 1993, p. 1.*

This cartoon features two central figures of Middle-Eastern peace efforts of the 1990s – Israel's Prime Minister Itzhak Rabin and the first Head of the Palestinian Autonomy (PA), Yasser Arafat. The charismatic and emotional Palestinian leader was the protagonist of many jokes and rhymes, and some have outlived him. While in the Hebrew-language satire the image of Arafat almost overnight changed from a villain to a comic hero combining both positive and negative traits and becoming a statesman and an Israeli partner in peace efforts (Shifman 2012: 98–99), in the Russian-language humor and satire his image of a terrorist remained dominant. In the cartoon on fig. 15 the representation of the two politicians is based on Soviet iconography. Rabin's open trench coat and a Russian cap with ear-flaps fluttering in the air are reminiscent of a comic portrayal of the Soviet soldier of the World War II period. Arafat is wearing a Keffiyeh, a traditional Arab headdress that became an inseparable part of his image, and came to be known as "*arafatka*" to Russian speakers during the first Intifada. But the rest of his appearance – a characteristic posture with the right hand in the pocket, a sly smile on the face, a suit with a vest and a compulsory cap on the head leave no doubt about the figure's similarity to Lenin. The blend of the two images seeks to intensify ridicule of the two politicians and negative attitudes to peaceful initiatives.

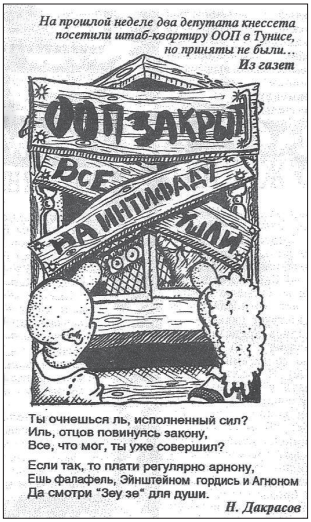

Figure 16. *Anonymous, "PLO is closed. Everyone has gone to Intifada", Beseder?, 30 Jul 1993, p. 1.*

A snapshot representing a shabby wooden house locked up and carrying a sign "The party committee is closed. Everyone has gone to the front" became widely known in the Soviet Union after it had been included in a school history book. The original image appeared in the documentary "Happiness Hard Won" which commemorated the 20th anniversary of the Komsomol[10] (The movie was created by Ya. Posel'sky, N. Wendger and F. Kiselev in 1938). The image and the text were so frequently reproduced in narratives about heroism of young Bolsheviks that many came to believe it was an actual photograph of the period, while in reality the scene was designed for the movie (Serov 2003). Pervasiveness of the Soviet propaganda triggered humorous attitudes to this text and turned it into a cliché used to refer to any public organization that was not working or serving clients as it should. The cartoon with the text "PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organization) is closed. Everyone has gone to the Intifada" served as an illustration for a satirical poem and both were published in *Beseder?* on 30 Jul 1993. The publication was a response to the information in the Israeli press about members of the Israeli Parliament who intended to visit the headquarters of the Palestinian Liberation Organization but were not received by its head Yasser Arafat. The text of the poem is a pastiche of Nikolai Nekrasov's poem "Reflections at the Gala Entrance". The source text expresses the poet's anger at Russian aristocracy degenerating in hedonism and indifferent to the plight of the poor and destitute. It also renders Nekrasov's bitterness at passivity and submissiveness of the Russian peasants incapable of shaking off the inner slavery that eroded the spirit of the nation. The title of the pastiche is "Reflections at the ill-starred entrance". The text is signed by N. Dakrasov – an obvious hint at the source of

the pastiche. Its structure replicates the source text. The part of the haughty aristocrat who chooses to give or not to give favors to the people asking for them is given to Yasser Arafat; the city residents displaying slave-like reverence of the aristocrat are transformed into Middle East leaders visiting the headquarters of the PLO out of tribal solidarity; and humble peasants not allowed to present their requests to the aristocrat are replaced by Israeli parliamentarians. Reversing the roles of the actors – in reality Arafat had to ask Middle-Eastern leaders for patronage in relations with its powerful neighbor, Israel, – the author presents attempts to make peace as "undermining of the foundations of terror". To increase the absurdity of the situation the parliamentarians pray looking at the mosque, and murmur "May Allah judge you" (in the source text the peasants turn their eyes to church while praying). The change of religion is often perceived as the worst type of treachery, in particular, when it is the religion of the enemy, and this is what is implied by the triple repetition of words associated with Islam when describing the behavior of the parliamentarians. The text clashes Russian idioms with Middle-Eastern realities not only to amuse the reader but to intensify the perception of the situation as surreal and absurd. Like the source text, in the end the pastiche addresses a rhetorical question to the people, slightly paraphrasing the original: "Will you ever wake up full of strength? Or do you obey the laws of the forefathers and have already accomplished everything you were capable of?" But the very end of the source and the target texts differ significantly. Nekrasov's sounds sad and pathetic: "…or have you created a song akin to a groan, and your spirit is gone forever?" By contrast, the target text is cynical and derides the rank-and-file Israeli: "If so, pay *arnona* [land tax] regularly, eat *falafel* [Middle-Eastern fast food], take pride in Einstein and Agnon, and to satisfy the needs of your soul watch *Zeu ze* [a Hebrew-language entertainment TV show]."

This textual-visual ensemble derides the enemy and domestic politicians, as well as the host society as a whole, relying on the cultural codes well familiar to the target audience. Its purpose is not only to amuse but also to form the attitude of the readers to political events. Like other pastiches published in the Russian-Israeli press in the 1990s, it mobilizes the meanings of the source texts intended by the authors, but also those that were added in the process of multiple reproductions, innovations and folklorization.

As time went on, humor of the Russian-speaking Israelis became less dependent on the Soviet symbols and images and more firmly

grounded in Israeli realities. Immigrants learned to use bilingual humor in a more sophisticated way and allusions to Jewish history and culture became more frequent. The repertoire of precedent texts was also gradually changing, reflecting the bi-lingual and bi-cultural present of the Russian-speaking community in Israel.

Confronting Terror with Mockery

One of the first issues determining the group's attitude to the conflict is security. And this is why in the debate about giving up territories and returning to the borders of 1967, Russian-speaking Israelis are adamantly against giving up land as part of the agreement with Palestinians. While veteran Israelis lovingly call Israel, *artseinu haktantonet* (our tiny little country), Russian-speakers are still nostalgic for the vast expanses of the "old country". This attitude is manifested in numerous jokes and rhymes:

> - Why do drivers in such a small country as Israel face such huge problems?
> - Because speeding results in the violation of the state border.
>
> (*KVN*, Israel's national team, 26 Sep 1992)

> - Why does everyone refer to Israel as an aggressor?
> - Because the country is so small that when you put its name down on the map you inevitably get onto someone's territory even against your own will.
>
> (http://forum.souz.co.il/viewtopic.php?t=55607, posted on 7 Sep 2006, last accessed on 25 Dec 2011)

> This is the University of Haifa
>
> - Is it true that when the weather is good, one can see the border with Lebanon?
>
> - Yeah, but don't worry, soon you will be able to see it even when the weather is bad.
>
> (KVN, Tel-Aviv team *Train Station*)

Claustrophobia and fear of small space is a recurrent theme of informal discourse of Russian speakers and was documented in the study of personal narratives (Fialkova & Yelenevskaya 2007: 164–167). It came up again in 2010, when Israeli media discussed Bill Clinton's remark that peace in the Middle East was stalled by settlers and "Russian" immigrants. Clinton allegedly cited Natan Sharansky's[11] words that

as a "Russian" coming from one of the biggest countries in the world to one of the smallest states, he was not prepared to give away half of the territory, http://www.newsru.co.il/israel/23sep2010/bibi_bill_104.html, last accessed on 12 Dec 2012. Clinton's remarks were severely criticized by Hebrew- and Russian-speaking Israeli politicians. The angry comments of the latter did not leave doubt that, indeed, the fear of small space was not overcome even 20 years after immigration.

The beginning of the second *Intifada* made peace even more illusory than in the 1990s and triggered proliferation of disaster humor among Russian-speaking Israelis. While politicians of all stripes and colors were still severely criticized and derided the main attention was given to the pervasiveness of terrorism. There are many examples revealing that gallows humor is in demand in the periods of natural, social and technological disasters, as well as during and after wars. In Britain, e.g., there was a renaissance of ruthless rhymes during World War II (Gruner 1997: 50–53). Waves of sick humor were caused by the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in Ukraine (Fialkova 2001); by the Gulf War in Israel (Nevo & Levine 1994); by September 11 in the U.S.A. (Ellis 2002) and in the Muslim world (Diamond 2002).

Scenes of violence and death have become an inseparable part of the entertainment industry. Movies in the genre of "action" and thrillers demonstrating bloody murders, as well as TV broadcasts from the battlefield and from the sites of terrorist attacks have become part and parcel of contemporary life. Yet violence and death still remain tabooed topics of humor in public discourse. Censorship that used to keep such humor restricted to oral dissemination no longer works due to the pervasiveness of electronic media.

Researchers investigating gallows humor tend to agree that it enables people to release tension, fear and anxiety. When targeting members of an ethnic or national group perceived as hostile, such jokes may offer a socially sanctioned outlet for the expression of aggression towards that group (Dundes & Hauschild 1988: 56). Moreover, gallows humor is viewed by some individuals as an apt expression of patriotic feelings and thus contributes to the delegitimization of the target group. As a result, while in some cases humor lessens the severity of violence it also lowers our inhibitions, and we are more apt to be violent if we are less inhibited (Nielsen 1997: 478).

In the humorous texts exposing terrorism, death and violence are presented as routine facts of life that don't really bother people confronting them. On the contrary, peaceful life is viewed as an anomaly.

Thus in 2001, the residential neighborhood *Gilo* in the southern part of Jerusalem was the target of massive shooting from the territory of PA. This is how *Beseder?* reacted to it:

> Veterans of World War II, apartments for you! The last 30 apartments are available in *Gilo* for those who wish to recall days of their youth.
>
> (Beseder? 11 Jan 2001: 3)

The mentioning of World War II veterans is not accidental. Before the 1990s, the role of the Soviet Union in winning the war against the Nazis had been virtually unknown to the wide public in Israel before the 1990s. Thanks to the activities of the Association of World War Veterans, Russian-speaking politicians and the Russian-language media Victory Day became a state holiday in Israel, and several museums and memorials dedicated to Jews fighting in the ranks of the Red Army were opened (see chapter 3, pp. 172–174). Among the often repeated arguments in support of the hard-line position in the Arab-Israeli conflict is a claim that ex-Soviets, whose fathers and grandfathers liberated Europe from the "Nazi plague" have a better understanding of the Middle-Eastern conflict than other sectors of Israeli society (Gutina 2011: 156–158). Allusions to World War II in the interpretation of the conflict is a recurrent theme both in the serious and humorous discourse of Russian-speaking Israelis (Yelenevskaya 2009a).

Another source of gallows humor is the southern town of Sderot which has been the target of *Kassam* missiles and later more powerful weapons sent from the Gaza strip for at least 10 years. As the range of the missiles and shells shot by Palestinians increased, other Southern towns of Israel, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Beer Sheva and several smaller localities became targets as well. Each time there is an escalation of the conflict and residents of the South are forced to spend a considerable amount of time in shelters, there are numerous discussions in the media questioning the policies of restraint which perpetuate sufferings of peaceful citizens who always have to be on the alert for a new attack. Folk wit responded to the painful situation with a *chastushka* which circulated orally and by e-mail:

Vzgliad moi rvetsia v nebesa
Zvuk sireny tonok
Poliubila ia kassam
Gde ty, moi milionok?

My eyes are glued to the heavens
And ears are deafened by alarm
I fell in love with you, *Kassam*
Where are you, my sweet devil?!

Traditional *chastushkas* are often performed as a dialogue between groups of young girls and boys poking fun at each other. This one was hardly written with the hope for a response.

While residents of Sderot were exposed to *Kassams,* the government had to withstand the barrage of criticism for its failure to protect civilians, in particular children. And Russian-language humorists also had their say in this chorus:

Associated Stress

Sderot: The government has decreed to give local schoolchildren notebooks made of concrete which can be used as a cover during missile attacks.

(*Beseder?* 23 Nov 2006)

The role of the children is a distinctive theme in the discourse on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Israeli media often release information about Palestinian adolescents throwing stones at soldiers and civilians. A matter of concern coming up in formal and informal discourse is anti-Israeli propaganda in textbooks used in Palestinian schools and educating the young generation in the spirit of hatred against the neighbor. At the same time, Israelis are aware that Palestinian children often become victims of the armed clashes. During military operations Israeli media report that terrorists use hospitals and schools for hiding weapons and launching missiles, thus turning their own civilian population into hostages. Naturally, this knowledge triggers ambiguous attitudes, giving vent to narratives in which sympathy takes the upper hand over fear and hatred. The poem quoted below is another pastiche, paraphrasing a children's song "Tired toys are asleep", music by A. Ostrovskii, lyrics by Z. Petrova. The song entered every Soviet house in which there was a TV set, because every night it closed the immensely popular program for children "Good night, kids" broadcast on the central TV. But while in the source text children are promised dreams in which they can fly to the moon, ride along a rainbow, make friends with an elephant and get a firebird's feather, only cannons and explosions are awaiting their Palestinian peers in dreams and in reality:

Palestinskaia kolybel'naia

Spiat ustalye igrushki,
krepko spiat.
Avtomaty, miny, pushki zhdut rebiat
Za god vse ustali ochen'
Ot strel'by i dniom i nochiu.
Glazki zakryvai – baiu-bai.
Baiu-bai dolzhny shakhidy krepko spat'
Baiu-bai – zavtra budet
chto vzryvat'.
Za god vse ustali ochen'
Ot strel'by i dniom i nochiu.
Glazki zakryvai – baiu-bai.

Palestinian lullaby

Tired toys are sound asleep
Dilli-dong, sleeping tight
Guns, mines and cannons
Are waiting for the kids
Little kids, dilli-dids
The year was hard, the race was tight
All are worn out shooting day and night
Close your eyes, dear, and good night
Our little *shahids* should sleep tight,
Tomorrow there will be another site
To blow up, so that's all right.
Close your eyes, dear, and good night.

(Boris Kinzburskii, *7–40*, No. 36, Feb 2002: 11)

The Soviet writer and translator Kornei Chukovskii made children's observations, unintended puns and aphorisms, coined in the process of native language acquisition, a genre of literature when he published his diaries documenting children's talk. This book entitled "From Two to Five" (Chukovskii 2001) inspired many parents and grandparents to record the gems of their offspring's verbal creativity. Russian-speaking Israeli parents have not abandoned this tradition, all the more so that bilingual children are especially ingenious in their language use. Some of these observations reflect the impact of the Arab-Israeli conflict on children's everyday life and mentality.

Infants' babble

Grandmother walking with little Natalie:
- Don't pick up this candy from the ground!
Natalie:
- I know. There is a bomb in it!

(L. Nadel' & O. Ogonovskaya, *7-40*, No. 28, Jun 2001)

Those who grew up in the Soviet Union remember parents' admonitions not to pick up candies outside home. Obsessed with hygiene, parents were afraid of infection, but to make the prohibition stronger some would say that sweets found on the ground could be poisonous. In Israel any object found in a public space without an owner arouses suspicions that it is a bomb. In such cases police clear the place of bystanders and activate a robot to pick up the suspicious object. Children grow up with the awareness that any object that does not have an owner may be dangerous and take it for granted that even a small candy can be deadly.

Scenes from our life: Children play "*Azaka*"

My sister lives in Ashdod. Her granddaughters – the elder one is not yet six, the junior one is less than three years old – are bored of house arrest. On a big balcony equipped with a swing, artificial grass and a toy-house they enact "*azaka"* [a sound alarm notifying citizens of an approaching missile]. They play some game, then the elder one moves aside and screams imitating the emergency alarm signal. The younger one shouts: "*Azaka,* come quick, let's get into the house. After they hide in their little house the elder one says: Let's count "booms".

Posted by Appolinaria, 12 March 2012, http://forum.israelinfo.ru/viewtopic.php?t=43629&postdays=0&postorder=asc&start=60, last accessed on 15 Oct 2012.

Children always play wars. In the Soviet Union groups of adolescents would divide into teams in which "Cossacks" would play against "bandits", the "Reds" against the "Whites", or against "fascists" (cf. Fialkova in this book, pp. 200–201). Boys were more inclined to such games, but missiles targeting towns made gender irrelevant for the children enacting their experience in play. Similar games played by the girls were described during the military operation "Pillar of Defence" (November 2012) which was accompanied by massive shelling of the South of Israel (Shuster 2012: 10). Residents of the areas targeted by

shelling got into a habit of counting explosions or "booms". The international onomatopoetic word is used both in Russian and in Hebrew, but its use in the plural form in Russian shows interference with Hebrew and evolved as a result of local experience. While some Israelis are full of anxiety counting explosions and trying to figure out how far they are from the missiles that reached the target and whether the missiles were grounded by an anti-missile system (see the section "City Threats: Between missiles and delinquents" in chapter 1, pp. 63–69), others report "counting booms" as a risky experience bordering on the comic and absurd.

> I called a friend in Ashdod: They have a new-old attraction for children and adults: everyone comes to the balcony, looks at the Iron Dome and counts missiles that it shoots down.
>
> http://zanuda.offtopic.su/viewtopic.php?id=9666&p=3, posted by Esfir' Ierusalimovna on 15 Nov 2012, last accessed on 24 Nov 2012.

War perceived as a spectacle and a show allows one to distance oneself from the horrifying reality. In this particular case curiosity was mixed with the feeling of triumph at the sight of the Israeli anti-missile systems' success.

Moving between crises Israeli society never lets relations with the neighbors out of focus. Besides news and analytical articles, Israeli press often publishes surveys of the Arab media, while the Arab newspapers cite the Israeli press. Both parties usually have one purpose in common: to present the neighbor in the most unappealing light. Here are three texts that parody such surveys:

> Arrested in Khartoum: A resident of Palestinian Autonomy was arrested for trying to smuggle out 5kg of heroine masterfully hidden in an ordinary belt with explosives.
>
> (*Mig*, 18 Dec 2003: 34)

> Following the prevention of a massive terrorist attack in Haifa, a three-day mourning was announced in the PA.
>
> Palestinian police are investigating an outrageous case of fraud. A ninety-year old lady from Schem[12] had been saving money all her life to sponsor a terrorist attack in the center of the country. Her dreams went to rack and ruin when goons from the *Tanzim*[13] group commissioned to carry out the operation took all her savings but failed to carry out the attack.
>
> (*Beseder?* 13 Feb 2003: 2)

These texts have no puns or hyperboles, there is no play with paronymy or homonymy, neither do they clash different meanings of polysemantic words. They imitate the dry language of news reports devoid of imagery. The incongruity typical of humor is manifested in the clash between the world as we know it and the world of the text. Drug trafficking and non-compliance with the terms of the business agreement are presented as more severe cases of criminal behavior than plotting and carrying out terrorist attacks. Prevention of an attack which saves lives does not come out as a triumph but as a defeat and a cause for mourning.

Metamorphoses of the good and the evil in the absurd world of gallows humor question morality and sanity of the actors:

> He was a good man: he helped old ladies cross the street, distributed condoms among children, and helped *shahids* blow themselves up.
>
> (http://laps.zahav.ru/?s=шахид, last accessed on 15 Nov 2011)

This text parodies two Soviet jokes. One is about young pioneers who forced old ladies to cross the street, because they had to report on the number of their "good deeds" at school. The other is one of the numerous Lenin jokes: Lenin receives a parcel from the Red Cross and instructs his aides to give it to the children. When the aides tell him that the parcel contains condoms he orders: "Then puncture each one and donate them to the mensheviks."

In enumerating merits we intuitively go from the weakest to the strongest one. Of the three mentioned here, only care for the elderly, although in the form ridiculed in a popular joke, qualifies as a moral act. But what do we make of giving condoms to minors – a reversal of the quoted joke? Helping suicide bombers die is even more ambivalent. Does it imply help in carrying out the attack or killing the suicide bomber to prevent death of others? And even if the attack had been prevented, could the terrorist have been stopped without being killed? The text deliberately leaves the dilemmas unresolved letting the addressee wonder as to which of the two scenarios is more realistic.

One of the best known genres of gallows humor is sadistic rhymes. This genre has been popular in Russian humor since the 1970s (Belousov 1998), and since the 1990s its repertoire has been substantially enriched by émigrés. Some of the rhymes are paraphrases of the familiar texts circulating in the FSU, but most are new. Among those that were created in Israel, many deal with the theme of the conflict. Notably they do not only circulate orally but during the second

Intifada could be found in humor publications, such as the magazine *7-40* and *Beseder?* In 2001, the latter even held the competition of sadistic rhymes entitled "The Black Box" among the readers. Since this genre is stylized as children's folklore, in many of the rhymes reckless and ruthless children appear as the main actors. In Israeli rhymes terrorists and soldiers come to the foreground:

Vyshel Abdel' poutru na kryl'tso.
Myslíu o vzryvakh svetilos' litso.
Pulia so svistom smeshala mozgi.
Metko strelaiet snaiper Sagi.

Early in the morning sat Abdel' on a porch
Dreaming of explosions, his face glowed like a torch
The bullet whistled, his brain was just a mess
That's a good shot, sniper Ness.

(V. Talis, participant of the competition "The Black Box")

Here again we see the ambivalence of gallows humor. Are praises for good shots real or a pretense concealing anxiety about dangers of becoming a victim in the conflict? In the topsy-turvy world of sadistic rhymes deadly risks await everyone, but how far is that world from realities of everyday life?

Addressing Transnational Audiences

Russian-Israeli humor has never targeted community members alone. Already in the early 1990s, jokes and satirical texts created in Israel were disseminated among Russian speakers in the FSU and in other Russian enclaves in Europe and North America by word of mouth and by the press. As mentioned earlier, the circulation of humor became more intense with the growing popularity of *Ru.net*, Internet forums, blogs and humor hubs. Since the problem of terrorism became a matter of concern for many countries, including Russia, the humor of Arab-Israeli conflict increased in popularity in the Russophone world. Arabs, for example, became protagonists of international jokes popular in Russia. In the Soviet times international jokes used to feature Americans, Germans, the French and the English, and their general pattern was juxtaposition of stereotypical western values, habits and behavioral patters against those attributed to Russians (Shmeleva & Shmelev 2002: 75–82). Arabs in the new international jokes are also

stereotyped: they are not smart enough to live in a technologically sophisticated world, oversexed and are engaged in terrorism:

> An American, an Arab and a Russian come to Mars. It's quiet and peaceful and only the hull of the *Opportunity* is sparkling nearby. All of a sudden manholes disguised under a layer of dust are opened and a crowd of residents of Mars jump out: "What a surprise! We were waiting for you to come!!! Welcome!" (…) They embrace the guests, lift them up, shower them with gifts, drag them down, set the table, and pour whatever drinks one serves on Mars.
>
> The Russian frees himself from embraces, runs to the capsule and comes back in a minute, "Hey, you are great guys! I saved a bottle of vodka for a rainy day, so here it is – for you!"
>
> The American also went to the capsule: "Here we go… hmm… French cognac from the great American nation!"
>
> The Arab is talking quietly to himself: "Yeah, they are great guys, no doubt… but I won't drag all those plastic explosives back home …"
>
> http://www.katakl.com/modules/anekdoty/article.php?storyid=2754, posted on 1 Nov 2004, last accessed on 15 Dec 2012.

Gradually learning the local repertoire of humor, Russian speakers began translating jokes circulating in Israel in Hebrew and in English into Russian sending them by mail to friends outside Israel and posting them on popular humor hubs such as www.anekdot.ru. Cartoons presenting the Russian-Israeli vision of the Middle East, including the Arab-Israeli conflict, can be found in the online catalog of Russian cartoons http://caricatura.ru, where their artistic value and ideological message are discussed and commented on by Russophone viewers residing in different countries.

In 2006, during the 2nd war in Lebanon Israeli bloggers, including Russian-speaking users, mounted a campaign whose goal was to explain Israel's position to the world and to counteract anti-Israeli propaganda in the international media. Jokes and cartoons became an essential part of this spontaneous campaign. Importantly, some of this humor dealt with Russia's involvement in the Middle-Eastern conflict. Already in 1991 during the Gulf War Russian-speaking émigrés saw bitter irony in the fact that missiles shot at Israel by Iraq were Russian-designed *Scads.* Throughout the 1990s residents of the northern villages had to spend many an hour in shelters when Hezbollah units were shooting *Katiushas*, Soviet missiles, developed and first used against the Nazis during World War II. Among those sitting in shelters were the elderly who had participated in creating

Figure 17. *Oleg Sh., "I don't see anything…" Many Israelis are convinced that while the world is sympathetic to Palestinians, the predicament of Israeli civilians suffering from terrorism remains hidden. This cartoon criticizing passivity of the UN peace-keeping force in the Middle-East alludes to the lyrics of a once popular Soviet song: "I don't see anything, I don't hear anything, I won't tell anyone anything." http://caricatura.ru/art/sh/url/parad/sh/9921, last accessed on 26 Jan 2013.*

these weapons and using them on the battlefield. The motif of Russian weapons used against Russian citizens, (many immigrants of the 1990s have double citizenship) came back in 2006:

> The film crew of *Rosoboroneksport* [Russian acronym for "Russian Defense Export"] apologize to the residents of Israel and Lebanon for the inconveniences which might have occurred while a video clip advertising its new products was being shot.
>
> www.newsru.co.il/rest/15oct2006/anekdotes.html, posted on 15 Oct 2006, last accessed on 30 Dec 2012.

International media often write about gigantic profits of weapons producers and the motif of war as a testing ground for cutting-edge destructive technologies and state-of-the-art weapons is a recurrent theme of humor devoted to the Arab-Israeli conflict. This reflects fears of rank-and-file citizens who feel they are at the mercy of the military on both sides and have little control of their own life. When the end of Israel's military operation Pillar of Defense was announced, many

Israelis living in the South expressed relief but also worries as to whether the goals of the operation had been achieved and bombing of the Israeli territory would come to an end. In response to these concerns one of the participants of the discussion forum "Bloggers for Israel" posted the following text tagging it "stories, humor":

> They say that Israeli government has applied to the Guinness Book of Records to have the operation Pillar of Defense registered as the most expensive advertising campaign in history. It promoted Rafael's products, namely, "The Iron Dome"[14]. In this context stopping the operation against Hamas is the natural result of the campaign.
>
> Posted by nikonel on 22 Nov 2012, http://gaza2009.livejournal.com/, last accessed on 4 Jan 2013.

Jokes and cartoons posted on the net during military conflicts often form a virtual dialogue between Israel's supporters and opponents. Thus during the 2nd war in Lebanon the favorite "Lebanese" joke of the Russian bloggers mentioned "labor battalions", the units which have a bad reputation in the Russian army and are a source of army jokes. These allegedly peaceful units, whose task in war periods is to reconstruct destroyed roads and bridges, come out as unmanageable gangs of unscrupulous and marginal personalities:

> Russia announced that it would send two labor battalions to Lebanon. Hezbollah and Israel immediately announced capitulation.

Israeli bloggers responded:

> "International news agencies report: two platoons of Chechen militants captured two Russian labor battalions in Lebanon."
>
> www.newsru.co.il/rest/15oct2006/anekdotes.html, posted on 15 Oct 2006, last accessed on 30 Dec 2012.

Parallels between the Arab-Israeli conflict and Russian wars in Chechnya were often discussed in the Russian-language Israeli media during the second Intifada (Fialkova & Yelenevskaya 2007: 131). Then the emphasis was on the similarity of strategies applied by militants in the Caucasus and in the Middle East and on the psychology of the population in these areas tolerating the dictate of the militants. In the last joke quoted above, the parallel is back, but instead of sympathy for the Russians the text celebrates their defeat.

Humor at the Service of People's Diplomacy

After the Second War in Lebanon (July – August 2006), bloggers' campaign to support Israel intensified in 2009 during the Israeli operation in Gaza that came to be known as Cast Lead. Many of the texts and images created since 2006 have become part of the "information war" waged in the media, in social networks and blogs.

For a long time Israeli media abstained from broadcasting on TV bloody scenes of terrorist attacks, considering it immoral. As a result, many Israelis were convinced that the world was unaware of the price paid by civilians, and that the country was losing in the information war. During the military operation Cast Lead (December 2008 – January 2009), Russian-speaking bloggers created a community "Gaza2009", or "The war through Bloggers' Eyes" http://gaza2009.livejournal.com/, last accessed on 4 Jan 2013. Its purpose was to inform the public and explain war events to Israel's supporters. More than one thousand bloggers responded to the initiative, and internet users from 60 countries visited the site during the operation. The success of the site inspired its initiators to continue the blog in a different format under the name "Bloggers for Israel". It was active during the operation Pillar of Defense in November 2012. Like in 2009, during the previous campaign, among the posted materials were humorous and satirical texts. The potential of transnational connections of the Russian-speaking community that could be used to explain Israel's position to co-ethnics was noticed and appreciated by the government, and in 2010 the Prime Minister B. Netanyahu and the Minister for the Diaspora Affairs, Yulii Edel'shtein (an immigrant from the FSU) held meetings with bloggers encouraging them to disseminate positive information about Israel using the audiences of their blogs (http://blogoped.com/archives/2625#comment-47327, posted by Alex Blogoped on 16 May 2010, last accessed on 4 Jan 2013).

In 2009 the right-wing party *Nash dom Israil* (Israel, Our Home) which enjoys high support among Russian speakers sponsored the creation of another propaganda web site www.hamasa.net. The address itself is humorous: it means "Hamas doesn't exist". The goal of the site is to document and post materials exposing Islamist terrorists, "so that millions of common people could learn the truth about the Middle-Eastern conflict" (http://hamasa.net/%d0%be-%d1%81%d0%b0%d0%b9%d1%82%d0%b5, last accessed on 4 Jan

2013). As could be expected from the name of the site, several rubrics on this web site are devoted to humor.

During the operation Pillar of Defense, Israeli Russian-language mass media reported on various solidarity actions with Israel in the FSU. One of them was a PowerPoint presentation circulating by e-mail, on Facebook and in Russian social networks *Odnoklassniki* (classmates) and *Zhivoi Zhurnal* (Live Journal). It is a collection of snapshots on which adolescents and young people hold hand-made posters with texts in support of Israel: "Israel, Moscow is with you!", "Israel, Ukraine is with you!", "Israel, we are with you! Krasnoyarsk, from Russia with love!!!" and more. All the posters carry a positive message, except the last one. The poster in the hands of a young man, smiling from ear to ear, reads: "Palestine, fuck you!!!" and displays a drawing of fingers positioned to render a gesture with the same meaning. The abrupt change from cheering Israel to abusing Palestine was meant to surprise and amuse the viewer. The report about this action, as well as a selection of "the best photographs", including the abusive one, was published on the Israeli portal *IzRus* (http://izrus.co.il/nepolitica/article/2012-11-19/19682.html, posted on 19 Nov 2012, last accessed on 4 Jan 2013). As Kõiva and Vesik remark, messages circulating as viral e-mail messages are a new type of chain letters, which may promote a politician, or as we see in this case, a political action. It is next to impossible for a receiver to discriminate between information and disinformation. There is no way for viewers to know whether the presentation consists of genuine pictures, or is a propaganda trick. Various hoaxes have been the fastest growing portion of computer-mediated folklore (Kõiva & Vesik 2009: 109).

In recent years a salient motif of the Russian-language humor dealing with the Middle-Eastern conflict is presentation of Israel as the uncompromising enemy of the world terrorism. Israelis in these jokes protect civilians, find themselves in situations where they have to defend themselves and people of other nations, yet are constantly criticized for overreacting. In the mass media and in the informal discourse people often complain that when judging Israel and its policies countries apply double standards. One of the satirical texts carrying this message appeared just a few days after the assassination of Osama bin Laden. It alluded to the American press releases reporting on the terrorist's extermination.

Four helicopters landed in a suburb of Beirut under the cover of the night, and a group of Israeli soldiers from *saieret matkal'* (Hebrew for a "special unit") got off. They penetrated a carefully protected building and after 40 minutes of fire exchange left, carrying Nasralla's (head of Hezbollah) body. A DNA test, carried out on board the helicopter, reliably confirmed the identity of the body and in "full compliance with the laws of Islam" the corpse was thrown into the Mediterranean Sea. Three men perished together with Nasralla[15], as well as his 148th wife who sacrificed herself trying to shield her husband.

Bibi, Barak and Sarah (the Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, his wife and Defense Minister Ehud Barak)[16] watched the event on TV screens, filmed and broadcast through the helmets worn by the soldiers of the special mission unit. Late that night Bibi's report about the victory of the world democracy over terrorism was broadcast on all radio and TV channels.

Your home assignment: Describe the reaction of the world community.

(received by e-mail, 11 May 2011)

With minor modifications this text was posted on various web sites. Like many other provocative humorous messages, it challenges the addressee by structuring the text as a problem to be solved. Indeed, some of the Internet users took this at face value and sent their predictions. Some others re-posted the text adding introductory statements that left no doubt as to the attitudes expressed: "A simple assignment for you", "Bin Laden's assassination: What is allowed to Jupiter is prohibited to Netanyahu".

Conclusions

- Israeli Russian-language humor devoted to the Arab-Israeli conflict is grounded in the tradition of the Soviet political *anekdot* and relies on the precedent texts of the Russian and Soviet history, culture and art. As novices in Israeli politics, in the 1990s FSU immigrants had few opportunities to make their voices heard by the majority when they expressed pessimism about the possibility of peace. As a result, Russian humor and satire joined the ideological battlefield around the conflict using semantically complex multi-layer texts, which is typical of interest groups having limited access to publicity (Lõhmus 2009: 187).

- Humor of the conflict generates new topics but also revives old scripts adjusting them to the new events and personalities. New texts are created in response to the escalation of hostility but also as a reaction to attempts to resume peace talks with Palestinians. Pervasiveness of gallows humor in the jokelore of Russian-speaking Israelis reflects anxiety and common people's feeling of helplessness in the face of war and terrorist attacks.
- There is ambivalence in the image of the Israeli created in the Russian-language humor about the Arab-Israeli conflict: power, competency, and brutality in the attitude to the neighbor-enemy on the one hand, and tolerance bordering on weakness on the other. This contradiction of the self-image is a recurrent theme and was expressed already in the Soviet Jewish joke (see Shturman & Tiktin 1987).
- Like the rest of Israeli society, the Russian-speaking community presents a wide spectrum of political views, yet the voices of people with left-wing leaning are less audible than their right-wing opponents'. This tendency can be observed in the serious discourse and even more so in humor, where compassion for the plight of Palestinians is virtually non-existent.
- Russian-language humor interpreting the Arab-Israeli conflict is transnational in terms of producers and addressees. In the era of electronic media, due to the speed of dissemination and ease of access political humor has become an important tool of propaganda and is intensely used by the countries participating in the Middle-Eastern conflict. Russian-speaking immigrants of the 1990s are actively involved in popular diplomacy and reach out to co-ethnics in the Russophone world. Members of the group known for its "dissident" humor before emigration have evolved into creators of "patriotic" humor which mirrors views and attitudes of the Israeli right wing.

Notes

[1] All the translations from Russian are mine.

[2] The Hebrew acronym *ZAHAL* stands for The Defence Army of Israel.

[3] The comic list under this title with slight modifications can be found on several sites, e.g., http://kirulya.livejournal.com/2829093.html?page=2#comments, posted on 10 May 2011, http://my.mail.ru/community/sma-israel/23dc7c40b0f44db1.html, posted on 06 June 2011, last accessed on 25 Nov 2012.

[4] The popularity of humorous toasts is reflected in the abundance of toast collections on *Ru.net*; see e.g., www.Pozdrav.ru, www.pozdravOK.ru, www.SuperTosty.ru and others. Some of the Russian-language émigrés' portals post them in humor sections: http://www.souz.co.il/humor/category.html?id=27, http://iadsi.wmsite.ru/humoresques, etc. Moreover, humorists include them in their books and concert repertoire. One example is the Russian-speaking Israeli author Alexander Kanevsky. In his recent book *Confronting Laughter* toasts appear under the heading "Table Verses" (Kanevsky 2010).

[5] The joke collection of www.zahav.co.il contains 31,139 jokes sent and ranked by users. The humor section "Smile-Therapy" of the forum www.besedka.co.il displays 56 threads, the longest of which "Jokes" is 104 pages long with 2060 messages and 132,204 viewings. Numerous humor threads can also be found in various forums on the portal www.israelinfo.ru. One of the most popular of these threads "Who can make everyone laugh?" numbers 208 pages with 3116 messages and 508,454 viewings (last accessed on 6 Dec 2012).

[6] The first Palestinian *Intifada* (Arabic for "uprising") against Israel took place in 1986–1993; the second and more violent *Intifada Al Aqsa* lasted from 2000 to 2005.

[7] The terms "allusion", "cento" and "quotation" are sometimes used interchangeably since all the three are text-linking devices. Since the instances of intertextuality analyzed in this chapter emphasize symbolic likening between the source and the target, the term allusion seems to be the most appropriate of the three. My understanding of allusion follows the definition proposed by Harris "Allusion is the evocation of a person, character, place, event, idea, or portion of a text through quotation (exact or approximate), implicit reference through similarity, explicit reference or echo. Such evocation or suggestion is intended to lead the reader to bring some aspect of the referent to bear at that point of the originating text" (Harris 1991).

[8] Other examples are the title of V. Lenin's article "One step forward, two steps back", an excerpt from I. Stalin's speech "Life has become better and merrier", N. Khrushev's description of maize "The queen of the fields", which came to symbolize failures in agricultural policies, and finally, V. Putin's threat to "bump off terrorists in the water-closet". All of these phrases and utterances have become language clichés continuously quoted and alluded to in the media and in the informal discourse in Russia and in diasporic communities.

[9] The title of this publication was the Hebrew word for "Ok?", and the subtitle was in Russian. This humor weekly was publishef from 1991 to 2010, initially in the newspaper *Nasha Strana* (Russian for "Our Country"), and later in the paper *Vesti* (Russian for "Herald"). Its editor was the writer and journalist Mark Galesnik. Among the authors were professional writers, journalists and caricaturists living in Israel and in the FSU, as well as humor enthusiasts among the readers. Many of the texts first published in *Beseder?* entered folklore of the Russian-speaking community in Israel.

[10] Komsomol is an acronym of the Soviet communist youth organization.

[11] Natan (Anatolii) Sharansky is an Israeli politician and author. He was the first Soviet dissident and political prisoner released by M. Gorbachev. He immigrated to Israel in 1986 and became a politician and the head of an immigrants' political party *Israel be aliya*.

[12] Schem is the Hebrew name of the town of Nablus situated in the Palestinian Autonomy.

[13] *Tanzim*, or Organization, is a loosely organized Fatah militia which spearheaded some of the riots and traded fire with Israeli troops during riots in 2000 (Jewish Virtual Library, http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/arabs/Tanzim.html, last accessed on 3 Jan 2013).

[14] Rafael Advanced Defense Systems Ltd. is the Israeli company designing, developing, manufacturing and selling high-tech defense systems for land, sea, air and space applications. Among its products is the anti-missile system the Iron Dome which was first used in 2011 to intercept missiles shot from the Gaza strip at the Israeli territory.

[15] Hassan Nasralla is the head of the Lebanese political organization Hezbollah that was fighting Israeli troops and shelling Israeli territory in 2006, during the Second War in Lebanon. Because of the similarity between his family name and the past form of the Russian verb "*nasral*", a vulgarism denoting defecation, jokes exploiting this paronymy became popular in the Russian-speaking community and were willingly translated by immigrants into Hebrew to amuse veteran Israelis.

[16] Israelis are known for an informal style of communication even in formal settings. They have little deference when talking about politicians, so Benjamin Netanyahu, who was the Prime Minister at the time of Bin Laden's assassination, is commonly referred to by the diminutive Bibi.

In Search of the Self:
Reconciling the Past and the Present in Immigrants' Experience

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