



Sharing the Truth Through Laughter and Humor

BY MALKIE SCHULMAN

Twenty-four-year-old comedian and content creator Yechiel Jacobs is the most followed Orthodox Jewish comedian on the planet. With over half a million followers on Instagram and hundreds of millions of viewers across other social media platforms, he's built a massive audience in a very short time. Way before viral success overtook his life, his connection to Israel and the Jewish

people has been central to who he is. In fact, his love for *am Yisroel* and the land of Israel is what initially catapulted him into almost overnight fame.

Born in Israel, Yechiel lived in Beitar and Beit Shemesh until the age of four and a half. His family then moved to Cedarhurst, New York, where he grew up. Currently, Yechiel resides in Hollywood, Florida, although he admits he's rarely there for very long, as he flies out of the country several times a month to perform shows worldwide.

Growing Up Funny

"As far back as I can remember, I always loved being in front of the camera. As a kid, I used to tell everyone that for sure one day I'm going to be on the Disney Channel," Yechiel says with a laugh. "I was always conscious of whether I was being funny enough, especially in school. I did all kinds of impersonations for laughs and was definitely the class clown."

Nevertheless, though Yechiel hasn't made it to the Disney Channel, he *has* carved out his own spotlight,

building a presence on social media that in many ways surpasses his childhood dream.

"I come from a family of performers," he shares. Sam Jacobs, Yechiel's dad, is a well-known magician who performs regularly, and his mom, Danielle, is a dance instructor and a social media personality in her own right, known as the hilarious ultra-yeshivish rebbetzin Rivka Leah Zelwig. She's also collaborated with Yechiel in a few of his anti-Hamas videos, where the two play off each other. Yechiel's sister, Yocheved, presently a social worker living in Israel, shares the Jacobs' family sense of humor and has teamed up with him several times as well.

School performances were a natural outlet for Yechiel as a child. He was always involved in skits and plays, especially Purim plays, which he took very seriously. The holiday of Purim in particular was always a big deal in the Jacobs household.

"We had crazy costumes, like something out of a movie set," Yechiel says. "One year, we dressed up like zombies. Not amateur zombies, the real deal. I had teeth coming out the side of my face, and nails protruding from my neck."

Another year, Yechiel, his sister, and their parents dressed up as elderly people. They looked so authentic that people offered to help them cross the street.

"The funniest part was when we had been safely walked across the street by these kind people, we'd break out into a wild dance," Yechiel recalls, laughing.

Another Purim, they dressed up as a Six Flags roller coaster, complete with sound effects of both the roller coaster and the hysterically screaming passengers. Some of these performances were recorded and uploaded to YouTube, where they can still be found under the name "Jacobs Purim."

"When I was young," Yechiel recalls, "I'd sometimes join my father in his magic shows. Once, when I was twelve years old, we did a show in the chassidish town of New Square, New York. I performed a juggling act in front of four thousand people. That was cool."

Music and dance were also part of Yechiel's upbringing. "I took dance classes as a kid."

And the humor doesn't stop with his parents. Yechiel insists that his ninety-something year-old great-grandparents are a riot.

"They don't even try to be funny. They just are," he says.

After finishing yeshiva high school in the Five Towns, Yechiel went to Israel to learn at Ohr Yerushalayim (OJ). It was the COVID year, so he returned earlier than planned. When he came back, comedy was still not yet his focus.

"At that point, I just wanted to make money, so I went into car sales and then real estate," he says.

When It All Clicked

The turning point came after October 7, 2023.

"The October 7 war hit," Yechiel shares, "and I was seeing all this anti-Israel, anti-Jewish rhetoric all over social media and regular media."

What stood out to him most was that no one seemed to be responding or challenging it. He wanted to do

something but couldn't figure out what. Then it became clear. He could use his strength, his humor, to combat it. His thought was to use humor to highlight the insanity of antisemitic, pro-Hamas posts. It wasn't about using dark humor, he observes, but about flipping a very dark topic and making it light so people could see it for the craziness that it is.

"When I started, my intention in posting a video was not about growing my audience," he says. "It was just my way of responding to the hate."

Yechiel started posting about a month after October 7 and immediately he knew something was there. That first video reached half a million views. The second reached a million.

"I felt like Hashem was telling me, forget about real estate. You're going into comedy."

Within a week or two, he realized that while he may not yet be a comedian, he had most certainly become a social media personality.

"People were attacking my family, the Jewish people, and I felt I had to take a stand."

The videos spread quickly. They were funny, but they were also direct. He was calling out what he saw as the absurdity behind many of the posts attacking Israel and Jews.

"For me, it wasn't politics," he says. "It was that people were attacking my family, the Jewish people, and I felt I had to take a stand."

Whether impersonating popular Italian American comedian Sebastian Maniscalco or a ditzy, woke, multicolored-haired pro-Palestinian college liberal, Yechiel began to use his humor to draw attention to hostile rhetoric that makes no sense. For example, in one reel, Yechiel takes the well-known tune "The Sun Will Come Out Tomorrow" from the Broadway show *Annie* and together with fellow comedian, musician, and actor Eli Staiman, humorously rewrites the lyrics as "The Time Has Come Now to Martyr," using satire to call out antisemitic online narratives.

Yechiel confesses his online persona has a three-fold goal. One is to grow his brand. The second is to make people laugh. The third, and the one he's most passionate about, is to strengthen the Jewish community, to let them know they're not alone, and to stand with them as a proud Jew who loves his Judaism and his country, Israel. He regularly hears from people who

say they hadn't laughed since October 7 until they found his page. Many tell him they were in a dark place and that his videos helped lift them. Hearing that means everything to him.

Another powerful aspect of social media is its reach. When content goes viral, all kinds of people see it. Many non-Jews who knew little or nothing about Israel have been exposed to the truth through Yechiel's videos.

"I have non-Jews reaching out to me who say thank you for sharing that information. I had no idea," he says.

One previously anti-Israel Muslim even contacted him to say he was now questioning the rhetoric he'd been fed his whole life. Yechiel acknowledges that die-hard antisemites won't be changed by funny videos, but those whose opinions are based on misinformation can be swayed.

On another gratifying occasion after doing a show in Miami, Yechiel relates, "A young non-Jewish woman from India who was studying in the States came up to me afterwards. She said that until she started watching my videos she knew nothing about Israel. Once she began watching my stuff online, she started doing more research. She came to fall in love with the state of Israel and had recently made plans to visit there for the first time with her father."

Going viral has also led to unexpected connections. Yechiel has met and collaborated on pro-Israel videos with vocal pro-Israel Hollywood actor Michael Rappaport and celebrity singer and dancer Montana Tucker. One of his videos, a "Jewish dance edition" sketch with Montana Tucker and well-known British influencer and comedian Zach Margs, garnered one million views and shows the three performing a dance they dub the "tefillin wrap," as well as another called the "challah braiding" dance. He's also gotten to know Nate Buzolic, better known as Nate Buzz, an Australian actor who isn't Jewish but is very vocal in his support of the state of Israel.

As his anti-Hamas videos continued to expand their reach, Yechiel received a message from the Laugh Factory, a famous comedy club in Los Angeles.

"They told me they loved my videos and asked if I'd be interested in doing a ten-minute standup routine. I'd be performing with world class Jewish comedian Elon Gold, followed by the wildly popular non-Jewish comedian, Jo Koy."

Yechiel was given two weeks to prepare.

"Standing there on stage and performing was one of the most incredible moments of my life," he says. "Seeing positive emojis and comments on my phone is one thing. Seeing people laugh in real time is unbelievable."

Soon after, he was asked to be the headliner for a show at the New York Comedy Club in Manhattan.

"The first show sold within the first hour of posting, then the second show sold out. I had two full shows in one night. Watching those tickets go so quickly was amazing."

Since then, in the last almost two years, Yechiel has been traveling constantly, performing across the United States and internationally, including Canada, Australia, England, Guatemala, Panama, and Mexico. The venues vary in the amount of people they hold, he says, some

holding only 150 people while some theaters seat up to 1,500 people. If the venue is smaller, Yechiel will do multiple shows.

Every month looks different, he shares. Some months he performs every week. Other months are quieter. And on each set, Yechiel is there proudly wearing his kippah, even saying a bracha out loud on stage.

"I want people to see that I'm openly proud to be a religious Jew," he explains.

In the beginning, almost everything Yechiel did focused on Israel. Over time, he became more intentional about branching out. Today, Yechiel estimates that about sixty percent of his content is random or character driven, while about forty percent still leans toward Israel.

"But I'll always be there to defend the Jewish people and our country," he maintains.

Baruch Hashem, his commitment hasn't gone unnoticed. The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs flew Yechiel to Israel twice, both as a thank you and in recognition of the exposure he was generating. The Israeli government brought together social media personalities and influencers to reignite the flame of Jewish pride and remind them why the work they're doing matters.

"On the first trip, they took us to the Nova festival site and to the kibbutzim that were attacked," Yechiel discloses, "to show us up close what we're fighting against and to see what was actually happening on the ground. It was an intense and deeply moving experience."

The second trip focused on Israel's response to the atrocities and highlighted how the country has grown stronger, showing the light that emerged from the darkness of October 7. Yechiel reflects that these visits were helpful.

"Posting the same content even if it is dressed up in different forms can get monotonous, but seeing why I was doing it encouraged me to keep it up and even step up my game," he says.

Early on, Yechiel received a wave of hate messages, including death threats, for his pro-Israel videos. Some threats were even sent to his mother to intimidate him, warning her that they were going to go after her son. It was scary, he acknowledges. Over time, he realized many of the threats came from bot accounts rather than real people.

"One person can set up hundreds of accounts to flag pro-Israel posts and then automatically send out hate messages," he explains. "There was probably just one nasty hater behind it."

Still, he needed to decide whether to continue posting or stop.

"My mom was concerned but I felt that if I was getting threats, it meant people were seeing my content and I was making a difference."

Ultimately, Yechiel chose to continue and even increase his output. Eventually, most of the hate died down, though he still occasionally receives hostile comments.

Visibly Orthodox Jews in the media inspire Yechiel, especially prominent figures like conservative political commentator and media personality Ben Shapiro. On perhaps a less high-profile level, Yechiel views himself as a similar voice for the younger generation. "I thought if Ben can do it, so can I," he notes.

Yechiel values the fact that Ben is seen by millions as a relatable yet openly proud religious Jew.

"It's important that secular Jews and non-Jews not associate Orthodox Jews just as the man who won't sit next to a woman on a plane," he stresses.

On a more personal note, Yechiel has met Ben Shapiro on two occasions and shares that hearing Shapiro tell him he appreciated his videos was deeply affirming.

A Day in the Life of a Comedian

"I don't have a real routine," confesses Yechiel. "Every day looks different."

The only structure he consistently keeps is his davening and making a daily video.

"I wake up, pray, eat breakfast, and then say to myself, 'OK, Yechiel, what video are you making today?'"

When deciding what to turn into a video, relevance is key, Yechiel maintains. If something is happening in the news, he'll hop on his phone and make a video about

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it. For example, the minute the news broke that Trump put Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro under arrest, Yechiel posted a video, which – no brainer – went viral because it was so timely and intrinsically explosive.

The second thing he looks for is relatability. If people feel like the same thing happened to them or could happen to them, the video takes off.

"My most favorite character is whatever character I'm impersonating that day," he claims. But even the funniest character can get boring after a while, which is why Yechiel loves to constantly mix things up. His content, besides his Sebastian Maniscalco impersonations, includes Trump impersonations, absurd characters, and his most viral persona to date, King Julien, the lemur from the movie Madagascar.

"King Julien is mostly just himself," he says. "Innocently arrogant which is what makes him so laugh-out-loud hysterical."

Besides the laughs he's looking for, Yechiel often uses his characters to slip in deeper messages. For instance, in his signature over-the-top way, as King Julien, he will say, "Remember, be a cucumber in a world full of bananas," meaning, remember to be yourself. Don't feel pressured to blend in.

Another great thing about characters like King Julien is that they bring in people who would never inten-

tionally watch Israel related content. "They come for King Julien, and then they see the Israel videos. They message me, 'Bro, I know nothing about Israel, but your King Julien videos are killing me.'" From there, they're introduced to Israel through a clear and unbiased lens.

Though Yechiel acknowledges that his audience is primarily the Jewish community, religious and secular, his reach goes far beyond that. Jews and non-Jews attend his shows, and he estimates that around two hundred thousand of his followers are non-Jewish. His audience ranges from six-year-olds asking to take a selfie with him to eighty-year-old women coming up to him after shows for an autograph. However, the main age range at live performances is generally between 25 and 45.

Not every show has gone perfectly, Yechiel concedes. He recalls a Hatzolah event for major billionaire donors where the comedy did not land well. He was supposed to do thirty minutes but ended up only doing fifteen. Instead of laughing, people were saying, "Oh, that's interesting," Yechiel says he remembers thinking, "Uh oh, I gotta get out of here!" While he can laugh now about it, at the time, it was a very humbling experience. Looking back, he sees it as a part of the learning process and a reminder that humor, like any form of connection, only works once trust has been established.

"Most people who come to my shows already know who I am. They're coming to see me. They know what they're getting into. These people had never heard of me. I was overconfident. I hadn't earned their trust," he admits.

Looking ahead, Yechiel plans to continue creating content and performing stand-up. He'd love to expand into acting, but he's not willing to do anything that isn't acceptable to his religious standards.

"I already had an offer for a TV show that I turned down," he maintains, "because it was completely not my cup of tea. (i.e. not 'kosher')."

Yechiel also mentions the possibility of moving to Israel one day, although because of his present heavy travel schedule, it doesn't make sense right now to make aliyah. At some future date, though, "It's something I would love to do."

His passion for Israel is personal.

"Not only because I was born there. My great-grandparents were born in the Old City of Jerusalem. My great-grandparents are actually older than the state of Israel. I've had a family member participate in every war in Israel since its inception. My sister finished her army service in the IDF five years ago. Israel is my homeland. Even in America, my life revolves around it."

Yechiel's message to the Jewish people is clear.

"Israel is one of the smallest countries in the world, yet we are the biggest family in the world. And just like every family, we don't always agree on everything. But it's important that we have each other's backs and love one another despite our differences."

Beyond that, Yechiel's message to the world is simple: be happy. Don't worry. Don't take life too seriously. Enjoy the simple things and don't forget to laugh.

In other words, be a cucumber in a world full of bananas.

