

Z-mail Parshas Behar
Rabi Dovid Zauderer

THE “BORSCHT BELT” AND THE WORLD TO COME

Guess where I'll be staying this Shabbos, folks! I will be attending a weekend retreat at a newly built hotel in *The Borscht Belt!*

In case you're scratching your head and googling *borscht* and *borscht belt*, let me explain:

Borscht Belt is a nickname for the (now mostly defunct) summer resorts of the Catskill Mountains in parts of Sullivan County in New York. Borscht, a beet-based soup popular with Ashkenazi Jewish immigrants, was a colloquialism for "Jewish". These resorts were a popular vacation spot for New York City Jews between the 1920s and the 1970s. Beginning in the 1980s the growth of air travel made the Catskills less attractive.

[Well known resorts in the area included: Concord, Grossinger's, Brown's Hotel, Kutsher's Hotel and Country Club, the Nevele, Friar Tuck Inn, Gibber's, Granit, Raleigh, Stevensville, the Tamarack Lodge, and, of course, who could forget the Homowack Lodge? (I could!).]

Most Borscht Belt resorts hosted traveling Jewish comedians and musicians, and many who later became famous began their careers there. Comedians who have worked in the Borscht Belt include: Jackie Mason, Mel Brooks, Rodney Dangerfield, Don Rickles, Woody Allen, Carl Reiner, Sid Caesar, Phyllis Diller, Joan Rivers, Milton Berle, Jerry Lewis, and Henny Youngman.

The *Talmud* in *Taanis* 22a relates a story about the righteousness of common people and the incredible power of seemingly insignificant acts of *chessed* (kindness).

Rabbi Beroka Choza'a regularly visited the marketplace at Bei Lefes where Elijah the Prophet often appeared to him. Once he asked Elijah, "Is there anyone in this market who has a share in the World to Come?" "No, there isn't" was the reply...Meanwhile two men were passing by, and Elijah said, "These two have a share in the World to Come." Rabbi Beroka asked them, "What is your occupation?" "We are 'jokers' [comics]," they replied, "and when we see people who are depressed we tell jokes that cheer them up; and also, when we see two people quarreling, we try very hard to tell jokes that [lighten the mood] and bring peace between them.'

This passage in the Talmud underscores just how important it can be at times just to tell jokes that make others smile and laugh – especially when the others are sad and despondent. It turns out that cheering others up when they're sad can literally be your ticket to the World to Come! I wonder if all those Jewish Borscht Belt

comics were aware of the great mitzvah they were doing up there on stage every night at the Nevele or Grossinger's trying to get a laugh from the crowd.

Who knows for sure? One thing I do know ... these days we all could use some cheering up considering what's going in the world today. So I have snooped around the internet and collected a few jokes (mostly Borscht Belt-style humor) for you to enjoy:

~ There is a big controversy on the Jewish view of when life begins. In Jewish tradition, the fetus is not considered viable until it graduates from medical school.

~ I've got all the money I'll ever need, if I die by four o'clock.

~ Someone stole all my credit cards, but I won't be reporting it. The thief spends less than my wife did!

~ Just got back from a pleasure trip: I took my mother-in-law to the airport.

~ Who says nothing is impossible? I've been doing nothing for years.

~ Scientists say the universe is made up of protons, neutrons and electrons. They forgot to mention morons.

~ A group of five Jewish women are eating lunch in a busy cafe. Nervously, their waiter approaches the table. "Ladies," he says. "Is anything okay?"

~ My wife says I only have 2 faults. I don't listen and something else....

~ An ancient couple, married for many decades, hobble slowly into a family lawyer's office. They croak, "We want a divorce." The surprised lawyer asks, "After all these years? Why now?" The couple choruses, "We were waiting for the kids to die".

~ I told my wife I wanted to be cremated. She made me an appointment for Tuesday.

And let's not forget Borscht Belt comedian Henny Youngman's perhaps most famous one-liner:

~ Take my wife ,.. please!

HAVE A GREAT SHABBOS (AND A GREAT LAUGH TOO)!